



DON'T LET EVERYDAY

# INNOVATION

GET LOST IN PRESENTATION BY BRAD HOLST

When you think about the effective presentation of innovation, do you think of the late Steve Jobs? In a single presentation, wearing his trademark black turtleneck and using stunningly simple slides, he could take an idea you'd never even thought about and turn it into something you felt like you couldn't live without. The amassed fortunes of his company and its stockholders are living proof of the power of well-presented innovation.

But much more often, innovative ideas fail simply because they are poorly communicated.

## THE OFTEN OVERLOOKED POWER OF EVERYDAY INNOVATION

Let's divide the innovation that takes place inside an enterprise into two categories:

- The highly visible and very measurable Big Innovation
- The stealthier and harder to measure Everyday Innovation

**Big Innovation** is highly noticeable inside and outside of an enterprise. These are typically management-sanctioned, well-funded projects or processes that lead to outcomes like new product launches, go-to-market strategies, manufacturing processes, and/or new technologies.

Significant resources are typically dedicated to the ongoing communication and launch of Big Innovation. The launch of the Apple Watch and the Tesla Model S are recent examples of the magnitude of resources dedicated to the communication of Big Innovation. Volumes have been written on the topic of how to best do this. When the public and investment community perceive that Big Innovation has been communicated poorly, it can be headline news.

**Everyday Innovation** describes the ideas that are generated and shared, sometimes spontaneously, by employees on every level of an organization. Innovative ideas, from small process improvements to game-changing breakthroughs, happen in conference rooms, offices, hallways, and over web and video conferencing platforms. All are settings where the actual word "innovation" rarely makes the agenda as a topic of discussion.

## THREE DECISION MAKER HURDLES

People are quick to reject new thinking. When sharing an innovative idea, you must help the decision makers quickly clear three hurdles:

- **Understand what you are suggesting.** If you and your message are hard to follow, the decision makers are unlikely to pay attention.
- **See Value in your thinking.** Decision makers must first align on the issue your innovation addresses. Only then can they appreciate how your idea delivers compelling and relevant benefits.
- **Trust in your competency.** Decision makers must feel confident in your ability to act on your idea. Don't try to be slick or smooth. Just be yourself and let your conviction shine through.

To significantly increase the odds of your ideas being adopted, put yourself in the decision makers' shoes. Ask yourself: What can I do to ensure that they understand my idea, see the value in my thinking and ultimately trust me?

ORGANIZATIONS  
MUST BUILD  
A STRONG  
COLLECTIVE  
INNOVATION-  
SHARING  
CAPABILITY  
AMONG  
EMPLOYEES.

This underappreciated form of organization-wide, employee-contributed innovation can significantly help an enterprise deliver more value in many profound ways, including:

- Making or saving money.
- Boosting productivity and efficiency.
- Solving problems and/or avoiding trouble.
- Motivating people.
- Staying ahead of the game.

### ARE THE BEST IDEAS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION BEING HEARD?

Innovative ideas are in constant competition with other ideas and busy activities inside every business. Often, innovative ideas don't get noticed against all of this background noise.

It's an observable fact that it's not necessarily the most innovative ideas that get heard and acted on; it's the best-presented ideas that get attention – the ones that are clear, compelling and skillfully delivered by a confident messenger.

This sad and costly reality was hilariously brought to life in the FedEx "stolen idea" commercial. During a typical business meeting, nobody notices when a junior member of the team meekly suggests a smart cost-saving idea. But, when a sharply dressed executive shares the same idea in a comically confident fashion, everyone notices, much to the chagrin of the original generator of the idea.

The commercial, while laugh-out-loud funny, is also disturbing because of the negative impact this reality of human behavior can have on an organization. How many employees will continue to contribute innovative ideas after having had

an experience where they felt shut down or ignored? How many employees will speak up at all to share their ideas if they don't feel confident in their ability to communicate?

Many may conclude that innovation happens above their pay grade and choose to keep their ideas to themselves. This is a lose/lose situation. Not only is the potential innovation opportunity lost, but employee motivation, engagement and morale also suffer when people don't feel like they have the chance to be heard.

The fact that the best ideas, when poorly communicated, often don't get the attention they deserve raises two questions:

- What innovative ideas in your organization are getting "lost in presentation"?
- What does that loss really cost your organization?

The answers to these two questions for most organizations are: "too many" and "too much." And those costs grow even higher when you factor in the ideas that never get shared at all.

### DEMOCRATIZE HOW INNOVATIVE IDEAS ARE PRESENTED AND HEARD

Due to the innate tendency human beings have to discount or ignore others who have weak presentation skills, in order to fully capitalize on the power of employee-contributed innovation, organizations must build a strong collective innovation-sharing capability among employees.

Without this organizational strength, "lost in presentation" will be the fate for most new ideas (as it is now in many corporations). What's required is a developmental strategy that up-levels the essential skills that enable an employee to persuasively formulate, deliver and defend their ideas.

This approach is brought to life in the book, "Collaborative Leadership" by retired Cisco Systems executive George O'Meara. In his book, O'Meara shares how he transformed the Cisco Services Sales group and grew its revenue from \$800 million to over \$6 billion. This herculean effort required both Big Innovation and Everyday Innovation.

O'Meara describes his frustration with an "otherwise bright staff who struggled with presenting ideas in a way that would be crystal clear on the problem as well as the idea." To address that frustration, O'Meara drove the adoption of a common, shared communication framework his people could use to help them articulate their ideas more clearly, opening the door to a healthier, more productive dialogue.

The simple framework walked users through several stages of critical thinking and forced them to think from the listener's perspective. O'Meara believes that empowering everyone in his organization with a common tool, which enabled them and their ideas to be heard, helped to drive the transformation of Cisco Services. Not only did it positively impact how ideas were shared, overall communication and collaboration progressed much more efficiently and productively than it had in the past.

## DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

The first step in creating an innovation-friendly culture is to identify a communications framework that can be used by everyone to share ideas at every level of the organization. This important decision can determine the success or failure of your efforts.

In the case of Cisco Services Sales, O'Meara stated, "Transformation of any sort will go nowhere without tools to ensure processes are consistent, sticky and transferable." There are three qualities you need to explore with any potential framework:

- Is the framework broadly applicable to other business communication situations?
- Do users find the framework intuitive, quick and easy to apply?
- Does using the framework consistently produce desired results?

If the answer is "no" to any one of these questions, then the odds of broad employee acceptance and adoption of the communication framework are low. And, there is one more quality you may need to test if you do business on a global scale: Is the framework adaptable and effective for different cultures?

## DRIVING ADOPTION

Transforming how people in an organization share and listen to innovative ideas is not an easy challenge. As individuals, employees have to let go of their old habits and embrace the new approach. It

requires vision, tenacity and role-modeling on the part of leadership. That includes building in positive rewards and reinforcement for desired behaviors.

Employees will also require some form of training to feel confident in their ability to use the communication framework successfully. To be both cost- and outcome-effective, this strategy can't be a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it must take into account and be tailored for the roles, levels and experience of the employees within an organization.

Frontline employees may only need basic instruction and practice. As roles get more senior, and the expectations and stakes around innovation get higher, more sophisticated skills building is required in order to enable messaging, delivery and defense of innovative ideas in high-stakes, high-pressure situations.

Be aware that the process of adoption can be a bit messy. As George O'Meara shared about his transformational efforts at Cisco, "I'm not suggesting we did this flawlessly or that within a matter of months the entire organization was operating under a new cultural standard. Success using the tools came over time. As it began to work in one corner of the organization, as more and more people embraced the new behavior and tools, they became true believers and results started to roll in."

## WHEN GOOD IDEAS ARE ADOPTED, EVERYBODY WINS

Democratizing how ideas are shared and heard in your organization will help level the communication playing field to ensure that innovative ideas, regardless of who shares them, ultimately live or die based on their own merit and value. Everyone wins. Work will get done more effectively, employees will feel more empowered and engaged, and, ultimately, your business results will improve. 🔄

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## PRESENTATION OF INNOVATION FAILURES

### FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE VALUE

- **Apathy inducing opening.** Quickly link your idea to a top-of-mind decision maker issue. Then, clearly describe how your idea delivers compelling value, or risk disruptive interruptions.
- **Lack of memorable stories.** Why do successful innovators use well-told, emotionally-connected stories? They accelerate decision maker understanding and approval.

### FAILURE TO PROJECT CREDIBLY CONTAGIOUS CONVICTION

- **Nonverbal self-sabotage.** Fidgety body language, fleeting eye contact and repetitive "um's" can crush the perceived credibility of the idea generator.
- **Well intended but numbing professionalism.** If you don't sound excited about your idea, why should your decision makers feel that way?

### FAILURE TO BUILD TRUST INTERACTIVELY

- **Unprepared for common questions.** Questions mean the decision makers are interested. But being surprised by an obvious question can cause instant disinterest.
- **Overreacting defensively.** Tough questioning can feel like an attack on your idea and credibility. This can trigger extreme reactions, from timid to argumentative. Neither is good.