

PERSPECTIVES

Innovation Often an Excuse for Inept Leadership

Creativity Requires Discipline to be Effective

By Edmond Mellina



Edmond Mellina wrote this opinion piece for Canadian HR Reporter (www.hrreporter.com).

Published 22 times a year, the popular tabloid offers readers the most current news, information on the latest trends and practices, expert advice, experiences and insights from HR practitioners, research and resources.

Edmond contributes a column to this national publication on a quarterly basis.



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Innovation Often an Excuse for Inept Leadership

Innovation is back to the front burner. The dot-com burst and the corporate scandals forced corporations to focus heavily on cost cutting and governance. As a result, innovation became a lesser priority. Since then, the economy has been recovering nicely. Corporate governance has enjoyed great traction across industries and the headlines have stopped featuring new scandals. While corporate growth has returned, competition has intensified globally. Not surprisingly, executives are stressing once again the importance of fuelling innovation.

That's great news... unless you work for a 'fuzzy leader'. Not only does innovation represent a very convenient excuse for this type of managers, it acts as a catalyst that intensifies their dark side. The renewed focus on innovation gives them a license to torment employees – consciously or not.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing against creativity and innovation. On the contrary, I recognize how important they are to business survival, and I am a strong advocate for leaders who can foster an environment promoting creativity.

However, in the name of innovation, I've seen scores of managers – in line management as well as in support function such as HR or IT – provide fuzzy direction, move the target constantly and throw at their people thousands-ideas-an-hour. These are the hallmarks of fuzzy leadership.

Fuzzy leaders rationalize their style by professing things like: “we live in a dynamic world”, “we need to be flexible and nimble”, “change is accelerating” or “creativity requires lots of ideas”. Although I agree with each of these statements, I believe fuzzy leadership is extremely damaging when used out of context,

in an uncontrolled fashion, and on a day-to-day basis. The negative impact on people includes: confusion, stress, disengagement, lack of trust and fear. Interestingly, these are the very same things that prevent innovation and damage performance!

Why do fuzzy leaders act that way? It varies. Command-and-control managers might use fuzziness as an effective stratagem to dominate their people. When the target keeps moving, employees are always on their toes. When things go wrong, it's easier to blame them if the direction you provided wasn't clear. You just have to say: “that's not what I meant”.

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Not all fuzzy leaders are psychopathic though. Sometimes, the fuzziness steams from their insecurity or ineptitude. These managers don't really know in which direction to lead their people, so they keep throwing ideas at them while constantly changing the priorities. Also, generating ideas is easier than following through. The problem is that innovation without execution is absolutely useless.

Other leaders are fuzzy because they suffer from attention deficit. Their brain is in constant effervescence. Although their intent is nobler than the one of a manipulative leader, the impact is almost as negative.

My message to fuzzy leaders: stop hiding behind the 'Innovation Goddess'. Don't justify your ineffective style in the name of innovation. Don't fool yourself and others. Your style doesn't encourage innovation. Instead, by causing confusion, stress and fear – all great barriers to creativity – it destroys your team's ability to generate ideas.

It might sound like an oxymoron, but innovation requires discipline. There is a time to brainstorm, another to select the best idea, and then comes the time to follow-through and implement. While brainstorming is incompatible with structure, the rest of the innovation cycle calls for discipline and focus. Creativity without decision and execution isn't innovation. It's a

waste of time. Only through execution can a great idea be turned into innovation.

However, the goal isn't innovation per se, but growth (or at least survival) through innovation. A cool new thing that doesn't generate positive cash flow within a reasonable time frame has no business value. At best, it's called art.

Overwhelming people with your ideas is not the best way to encourage innovation. When you jump from one new thing to another, your ideas won't appear important to you. Therefore, nobody will follow-through. Every innovation worth doing deserves your commitment and focus.

So what can you do? First, give context to the innovation process by clearly articulating the priorities for your unit. Explain how they fit with the overall organizational strategy. More importantly, stick to them. Don't move this overarching target.

Keep in mind that products and services, like living organisms, evolve through stages. They require different things at different stages. If you lead a large team, organize them in groups catering to the various stages of the cycle: new-product development; product management; ongoing operation and maintenance. The structure will help turn ideas into innovation, while ensuring the unglamorous but critical operational work is done properly. If your team is too small to justify such an organization, consider asking your staff to devote a specific percentage of their time (e.g. 15%) to innovative ideas. Then, make sure to recognize and rewards innovation appropriately.

To focus innovation on existing customer problems, provide your staff with frequent exposure to customers. It will also help drive employee engagement by making customers real. Finally, your clients will welcome having a personal face on your products and services.

Finally, remember the power of fresh eyes when applied to existing problems. Albert Einstein experienced his first great insights into the nature of the universe while working as a patent clerk in Bern. In his dull government office, the young physicist was rather insulated from the

academic world. His great mind wasn't trapped in the mainstream paradigm of his peers. He could therefore be innovative and let his thoughts evolve freely towards the breakthrough

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of relativity. Similarly, assign people from a broad spectrum of backgrounds to your innovation projects.

Above all, recognize that fuzziness doesn't breed innovation – it kills it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Edmond Mellina is President of Toronto-based TRANSITUS Management Consulting Inc. For over 15 years, he has been helping national and multinational organizations successfully adapt to change, first as an executive and now as an advisor. A recognized expert at managing in an integrated way the two dimensions of change - i.e. human & technical - Edmond specializes in helping business leaders implement their strategy and improve bottom-line performance.

Edmond is a published author and public speaker. He brings a North American and European perspective on workplace environments, in both private and public sectors.

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