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5 Questions with Don Mroz: The state of corporate innovation

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1. Only five percent of executives felt their innovation programs were optimized, while over half, 53 percent, classified their programs as “emerging” or “ad hoc”, according to the [2015 Innovation Benchmarking Report](#), which surveyed 197 corporate innovation executives within varying sized U.S. organizations. What is the best way to implement and grow innovation and innovation programs?

First of all, I would not necessarily say there is any one best way to implement and grow innovation and innovation programs. Others may argue with me on that point, as I know some individuals and even companies will swear by a certain process. We certainly know that companies like GE, Coca Cola, Motorola, and numerous others have over time perfected their respective innovation processes which work well for them. Disney has workshops on innovation and creativity for people from all over in hopes of helping others to be more innovative. Companies like IDEO actually have mastered the innovation process and are hired world-wide to innovate, create and solve real-world problems. My belief has always been that culture has a great deal to do with how innovation is undertaken within any given organization. With that said, there certainly are best practices that can assist with the implementation, but if the culture is not supportive, then one must move in the direction of special projects, like the old “skunk works” efforts that are almost hidden efforts within an existing organization.

Certainly there has to be buy-in and complete support for any effort from the top of the organization. Innovation and innovation programs must become a way of doing business, which is why the culture is so important. This means risk-taking needs to be inherent to the process, and resources must be available, and with resources I am not only talking about money and people, but also time. Time to think, reflect, brainstorm, and think together with a team of people.



2. Fifty-five percent of executives reported that their innovation teams were kept very small, under 10 individuals. Should innovation teams be kept small, and what are the benefits of this?

Best practice seems to be keeping a team between four and eight people, and yes, it is fair to say that a team should not exceed 10 people. Keeping the team(s) small provides an opportunity for each person's voice to truly be heard and to generate ideas and creative thinking. If a team goes much

over this size, people are not heard and efficiencies go downhill. One might think that the more people the better, because more ideas could be generated, but actually the opposite is true. In addition, the make-up of such a team is key to its success. The trick, I believe, is to have a team of people with differing skills and even people who come from different disciplines. Diversity of thinking is key here, and so is the right atmosphere or culture of acceptance to differing ideas and thinking. Building a creative tension within the team is important so that team members know the task is important, but not so much pressure that it becomes emotional tension, which can defeat the creative process. Having a process for people to follow is key, similar to the question above, otherwise it becomes a free for all, and progress can be stifled.

3. "No business-unit buy-in" and "no senior buy-in" were two of the major reasons reported as to why innovative projects are killed. How should teams go about acquiring buy-in around innovative projects to get the projects off the ground?

Yes, it is difficult for innovation to work in an organization from the bottom up because the team needs the right people, additional resources, and support for the time allotment, etc. Senior management can provide all of those things and more, if necessary. In addition, if there are roadblocks (and there often are) within the business unit or organization in the form of resistance to the process, or what might be proposed, senior management can quickly squelch the resistance, or at the very least begin to remove some of the barriers to success. There are so many reasons for innovation not to work (e.g., resistance from others, jealousy because others were not chosen, lack of resources, structure of the organization, culture, etc.) that having senior management buy-in and/or business unit acceptance is critical, and as a result it is not at all surprising that these are two of the major reasons why innovative projects are killed. Just to be clear, it is not only getting innovative projects off the ground, but to sustain them, and see them to fruition, it is essential for top management to buy-in and believe in the process.

4. Focus groups and discussion platforms were some of the top tools reportedly used by innovative teams. What do you feel is the best way, or are the best tools, to elicit innovation amongst individuals and groups?

There are a good many tools available to teams that are involved in innovative projects and certainly discussion and focus groups are two of them. A process for identifying ideas with even well-used tools such as creative brainstorming, or brain-writing, are good ways for a group to start. Identification of the problem or the need should be accomplished first and foremost. Once that is clear, and the mission of the group has been solidified,

then using all tools at the team's disposal will be important. Depending upon the effort, site visits are always a good idea and exploration of other projects, or successes and failures, are also good ideas. Connections and intersections are important for thinking outside the box, so viewing totally different disciplines is always a good idea. Again, there are a host of tools/ideas and processes to utilize, and following a creative path means identifying those tools that will work best in one's culture, budget and circumstances.

5. In 2016, how important is innovation, and innovation programs, to an organization's success?

Our country has been known for innovation, and it has helped us to become the strongest and one of the most profitable nations in the world. Without innovation, I believe our ability to maintain a leadership role in so many areas within the world would begin to decline. It started with lightbulbs, automobiles, the assembly line, airplanes, and so much more. Now we are at the forefront of much technology and high tech innovations. All that is simply to show how important and critical innovation is, and yes that is also true for any organization, not only a country. Most organizations need to improve upon their processes, their products or their service and/or customer service as well. Without constant improvement, and sometimes ground-breaking innovation, an organization may not be able to sustain the marketplace. True, some organizations have been able to compete within a certain space by continuing to do what they have always done, whether that be a product or a service, but most cannot grow the business without innovation. Thus, as the world has become smaller, and competition has increased so dramatically, I believe it is an absolute necessity for businesses to innovate and be creative. Not ever easy, but essential!

Don Mroz, Ph.D., is the President and Founding Dean of the [Malcolm Baldrige School of Business at Post University](#). Mroz holds a Ph.D. in Human & Organization Systems, an M.A. in Human & Organizational Development, an M.A. in Guidance and Counseling, and a B.S. in Industry & Technology. Mroz has extensive experience helping businesses large and small manage change and find new ways to grow and prosper with a focus on quality, innovation, and continuous improvement.

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