

How to Develop an Innovation Mindset from the Top

Changing a culture to support innovation takes time, and will require executive leaders to be educated and support the change.

Consistency and reinforcement through the ranks is the only way to succeed. Most likely, management changes will be necessary because some people cannot operate unless they have total control. The leadership mentality needed drive a culture of operational excellence is different from what's needed to drive innovation. Senior executives will have to make tough people decisions.

Ask yourself these six questions to develop your “innovation-friendly” mindset:

- 1) Why innovation, why now? -- What is the business case for innovation? The more it evokes emotion, the better. People are more excited to come to work when they can collaborate, create, and feel they are part of creating the lifeblood of the company's future. “Relentless cost-cutting” doesn't inspire for long! (Imagine *that* vision inspiring the i-Pod ... the Blackberry ... or Walgreen's 24-hour drive-through pharmacy. Not likely.)
- 2) What's innovation *really* in service of?
 - Is innovation primarily product-based to gain market share? If so, is your product-innovation approach dialed into the customer's REAL needs (eg, do you have R&D people regularly interacting with production, marketing, and sales?).
 - Is innovation primarily about aligning technology, systems, or other operational functions? Are these confused and misaligned from constant expansion and mergers? An internal-focused process-innovation strategy is all about beefing up teamwork, facilitation, and decision-making skills.
 - Is innovation about getting the best solution in place for your customers and building lifelong relationships? A relationship-centric innovation strategy focuses on “partner-innovation” – creating alliances of people where synergy helps craft a better solution together than any one could have come up with.

- 3) Do you *really* mean it? What tangible investments will you make to support innovation – in terms of staff, training and development, capital, and reward / accountability mechanisms?
- 4) How will you measure it? You need “upstream” metrics that measure the critical elements of innovation, such as widespread agreement on mission, employee engagement, organizational learning, change management, and innovation as a company value.
- 5) What happens if we don't? If the risks aren't big enough, you'll never get support. Take the time to develop a business case that clearly shows the downside of NOT taking these steps – one your boss can smile at (whether the board of directors or the VP of Finance) and your employees can catch fire from.
- 6) What's your teamwork IQ? If you have invested in cross-functional teamwork, strong problem-solving and decision-making skills, good facilitation, high levels of accountability and trust, you are more ready for any innovation strategy you might pursue. If your “team and meeting culture” is still a PowerPoint centered, one-way, information download with very little dialogue, and no one is sure what to do afterwards, you're “innovation infrastructure” is going to need a jump start.