

Fostering Innovation: Six Tips

According to a recent article I discovered on HR.BLR.com, "The biggest roadblocks to organizational breakthroughs are a shortage of fresh thinking and too much red tape, according to executives interviewed for a recent Robert Half survey."

This shouldn't come as a surprise to most project leaders, over the years I've noticed that the path most organizations take to innovation is re-invention. According to the Robert Half survey, 35 percent of the 1,400 CFOs surveyed said a lack of new ideas is the greatest barrier to their company being more innovative with 24 percent citing too much bureaucracy as the problem. It was also interesting to note that 20 percent blamed being bogged down with daily tasks or putting out fires as the problem. Sound familiar? If so, it doesn't sound like you're alone.

I don't think there's any question that fostering an innovative project environment is important to ensure that projects are successful, and although the six tips identified in the survey will likely not be a surprise to this audience, here they are:

- Engage the Entire Team: "Empowered employees tend to be more innovative because they have a bigger emotional stake in the firm's success," suggests the report. I couldn't agree more. When the team is engaged (and that means everyone from sponsor to individual contributor) projects tend to not only be more successful, the project environment tends to foster an atmosphere of creative problem-solving and innovation.
- Remove the Red Tape: According to Robert Half International, "Employees become disillusioned when they put their time and energy into devising ingenious ideas only to wait forever for them to be approved and implemented." I'll go one step further. Nobody likes to ask "Mother, may I?" for everything. I learned a long time ago that it doesn't have to be exactly how I would do it to be successful. Giving team members some leeway in how they approach problems and come up with solutions often yields the best solution.
- Keep it Collaborative: "Create policies that support the open exchange of information and a team-first atmosphere," they suggest. I've witnessed organizations where competition and confrontation were the rule. I'm not convinced that's the best way to get the most out of people. When people can collaborate and work together, I'm convinced we get the best from them.
- Build a Better Brainstorm: It's suggested that we, "Rein in the naysayers who relish in saying why novel proposals won't work. Support 'blue-sky thinking.'" I've been in some incredible brainstorm sessions over the course of my career. I've also spent hours wasting time in fruitless discussions where every new idea is killed before it even starts to breathe. And, in fairness, I've sometimes been a naysayer myself. You've got to wade through a lot of ideas to find the truly great one.
- Give 'Em a Break: "Burnout does not beget brilliance." I understand that sometimes (and the operative word is sometimes) people need to put in extra time and work. However if sometimes becomes all the time, there's a bigger problem manifesting itself than overtime. I once worked for a guy who told me that if I was working eight or nine hours a day, I should start thinking about working ten. And, if I was working 10 or 11 hours a day, I should start thinking about working 12. Of course, he didn't want to compensate me for any of that extra time. If I had been working only six or seven hours a day he would have likely thought I was stealing a few hours a week from him—yet, he didn't mind taking a few extra uncompensated hours each week from me. Needless to say, I don't work for that guy anymore. If you expect people to consistently put in extra time and effort, it's really only a short-term performance bump. Long term, you'll lose employees and productivity will suffer.
- Seek Inspiration: "You'll have difficulty motivating staff to ignite creative sparks if you're feeling uninspired yourself," suggests the survey. The same five rules outlined above also apply to project leaders. It's just as important that you avoid burnout and are engaged as everyone else on the team. Wherever you go or whatever you do to feel inspired, make sure you spend regular time going there or doing that. Most project leaders have way too much to do and not anywhere near enough time to do it. Give yourself permission once in a while to step away from the desk and get the creative juices flowing yourself.

What are you doing to create an atmosphere of creativity and innovation within your project teams?

—Ty Kiisel, AtTask