Three Steps to Managing Innovators

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Part 1: Introduction

This article is written for managers who understand when business leaders like Roger Martin, the Dean of the Rotman School of Management, tell them that we all have a new job called 'Creating the Future'. For most of us this is re-enforced routinely. We notice it every time a less competent but more innovative business sector pulls ahead of us. We notice it every time a so called 'routine upgrade' proves to be anything but routine. Most of us realise that the research is correct and that to succeed in today's business environment we need to do more than just keep up with innovation – we need to deliver it. That means we need to understand how innovation works, engage our teams and make sure we are enabling them to deliver it. This is challenging for managers. Innovation not only calls for managers to switch to a different style of management but it also expects them to keep delivering that 'old job' of just 'keeping the lights on'!

Regardless of the challenges, it is a fact that we need to deliver innovation to survive and as any software developer will attest to, it is also a fact that innovation work calls for a different set of management skills. The manager who wants his teams to deliver cost effective innovation, as well as routine operational work, needs to learn what these differences are and start finding ways to apply them.

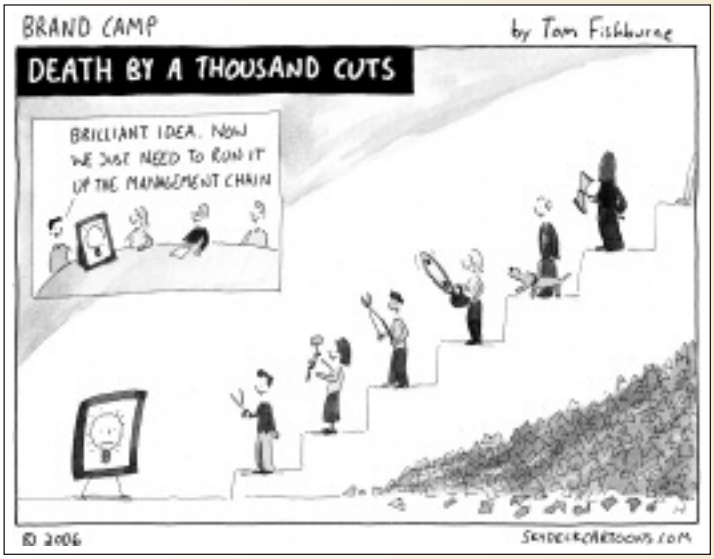
Fortunately the management techniques required for innovation work are straightforward, even familiar. The ones included in this article are drawn largely from various workshops and experience but readers will also recognise many of the principles referred to by various experts in the use of situational management techniques as well as in the management of knowledge workers and self directed teams. For our purposes, all that managers need to focus on is firstly, how to recognise innovation activities and secondly, how and when to switch to a more 'innovation appropriate' management style. Basically that 'switch' entails moving from a 'direct-monitor-critique' approach to one that 'leads, empowers and then, most challenging for most of us, gets out of the way'.

More details on the steps to 'Lead, Empower and Get Out of The Way' will follow in the 'Tips' section of this article but before we consider them let's examine some of the unique characteristics of innovation projects and investigate why and how we might need to begin to manage them differently.

Firstly, let's reiterate the fact that the delivery of both production work and innovation projects, at the same time, with the same people, has always been challenging. No matter how many innovation projects are underway, the obligation to control the routine processes, meet standards and respect the production demands of conventional work remains.

This challenge is further complicated by the fact that innovation teams and innovation projects behave differently and exhibit different performance characteristics. For example, 'failing our way forward' through unplanned events and iterations is an inevitable feature of innovation projects, but these 'surprises', if unexpected and left uncontrolled, can lead to disappointment, costly overruns and delays. The resulting performance pressures can discourage staff and create tension between the management and the project team.

This 'tension' is bad news for the manager because inno-



vation work relies on staff engagement, ideas and creativity. The obvious dilemma for managers is that the same approach that would put a production team back on track and in control can just as easily offend and derail an innovation team. The answer is to find a management solution that delivers performance control for both.

To 'manage' is often defined as 'to control' and to control innovation we need to answer three key questions:

1. How does our organisation lead, develop and reward innovation?
2. How do our project managers learn the unique skills required to control and deliver innovation projects?
3. How can managers learn to switch to a more appropriate innovation management style without violating rules, confusing their teams or hindering their routine production activities?

In recent years many organisations have been working hard to provide leadership and articulate how they intend to develop and reward innovation. Specialised project management training is also emerging. Many courses are now available to help project managers identify and control the idiosyncrasies of innovation projects. New information and best practices for the managers of the project teams has been less prolific but after a few decades of experience and a number of success stories, some basic tenets of innovation management are emerging. One is that innovation teams are by definition knowledge workers and need to be trusted, self directed and as mentioned earlier, managed differently. Still controversial but generally acknowledged is the fact that innovation is actually a default setting for most workers. Most of us just stop applying our innovation skills at work. Outside of work, many employees are busy changing some aspect of their lives, most of the time. However, when they try to apply their innovation experience at work they often find that conventional work and management practices begin to get in the way. Since innovation is a self-directed activity largely driven by ideas, the usual participant response to any form of resistance or criticism is to withdraw.

Project managers have understood these challenges for decades. As early as the late 1980's, project managers started to notice that innovation assignments, then often referred to as 'new growth' or 'I' projects, behaved differently than regular projects. As a result they called for a different project management approach. Projects with innovation components seemed to exhibit, among other traits, unforeseen iterations and surprises that routinely called for adjustments to both the budget and the integrated project plan. Typically these revisions included changes to the schedule, risks, resources, stakeholder management and communication plans. In extreme cases even the scope and deliverables were impacted. This resulted in projects that were either re-scoped or that came in late and over budget. Since the project managers were usually the first to shoulder the blame for these 'behaviours', they were also the first to try to find new ways to control them.

In response, project managers began to sensitise their teams to the presence of innovation components and to isolate them for special treatment. Project managers also began learning and exchanging project control techniques that modified the way they handled the risks inherent in the inevitable iterations of innovation work. The trick was to achieve this without offending the cultural norms and expectations of their managers and sponsors. This got even trickier when it became apparent that one of the key risks to many projects was the management. For obvious reasons, challenging the manager's approach was not in the best interest of either the project or the project manager's career so the risk of 'management style' was rarely raised. This behaviour may have been easy on the management culture but it has been tough on performance.

Progress for managers may have also been delayed by the confusing terminology that continues to emerge from the project management culture. Over the past few decades innovation projects have been called 'new growth', 'change management initiatives' and 'I' projects. More recently, especially for I&IT projects, terms like 'agile' or 'extreme' have been added to the list. For those readers that have been out of the innovation 'loop' for a while; similar projects were often called 'kaizen' or 'continuous improvement', twenty years ago. For our purposes, all of these terms basically describe the same type of assignment, project or initiative. At their core they all share the same universal characteristics. They all progressively elaborate. They carry more unforeseen risks and opportunities than regular projects. Successful delivery relies on agility, team work, ingenuity and controlled iterations in order to minimise the impact, exploit and integrate changes.

These characteristics impact on the project management process. The projects often require more pre-planning and stakeholder workshops before initiation. Their integrated project plans exhibit greater uncertainty and contingency as well as requiring more complex communication and stakeholder management plans. The execution phase is prone to more surprises, iterations and delays. The end results are projects that need project managers trained in innovation management, project teams that can deliver a lot of agility, creative thinking and teamwork and a manager that can understand and support that reality.

To the project manager trained in innovation work, these projects and their unique characteristics can represent exciting and rewarding challenges. For them, many of these unforeseen risks are manageable and some are even desirable. These projects can be challenging, but they can also be very rewarding if the project's idiosyncrasies are controlled and exploited. For example, opportunities often present themselves disguised as challenges to delivery or even as failures. These can be easily overlooked. If recognised and managed properly however, disguised opportunities can help secure the organisation's future. Imagine, for example, if 3M had left Post-it notes as just another failed adhesive.

The fact that it is usually the project team that uncovers the opportunities can present a further challenge for the manager. Since the team uncovers the opportunity, they also decide whether or not to share it. That decision will often hinge on the team's comfort level with the manager's innovation management skills. How likely is it that the manager's input will help? What are the chances that the manager will criticise the team, misdirect the process and delay the project? It is the team's answer to questions like these, not the manager's, that will determine the future course. It is true that innovation history resounds with colourful tales of dedicated innovators that have persevered. The Post-it notes story is a fine example of exactly that sort of corporate heroism. But those stories are probably the exception, as are, we hope, the number of managers who are willing to count on them.

The good news for those more realistic managers and sponsors is that the changes required in their management 'style' are minor and straightforward. It is true that for most of us, innovation management calls for some different approaches and a few new techniques. However many are familiar and with minimal practice most managers can learn how and when to 'switch' to them.

For some managers, the notion that we should adopt a different style and apply new techniques just to run a small innovation project or deal with an innovation component within a larger project, can seem a bit 'process rich'. But in practice it is really just another form of a situational management technique that is already familiar to many managers. When managers switch from a production management style to an innovation style they continue to stay in control and informed. They also continue to implement the familiar 'plan, monitor and execute' cycle of conventional work. They just achieve it using a different style – a style that continually leads, empowers and then, gets out of the way.

Part 2: Tip Sheet

"To stimulate creativity one must develop the childlike desire to play …" Albert Einstein

"Some managers forget that innovation and creativity are default settings. We have trained ourselves at work to turn off innovation. To turn it on again, all managers have to do is ask us to innovate and then get out of the way."
Workshop Participant

Managers that follow these three steps to innovation management can encourage their teams to deliver more innovation while at the same time remaining informed and in control.

The management techniques used to control these anomalies are based on experience. They are easy to learn and are complimentary to most conventional management practices. For example, Peter Drucker argued that knowledge workers need to be trusted and self directed. This approach reflects that fact and argues that since innovation is dependent on ideas and team work - in innovation work, every innovation worker is a knowledge worker.

Also, many will recognise that the notion of 'switching' is just another version of the 'situational management' approach that Ken Blanchard has popularised. For our purposes, switching management styles is just like changing a parenting style - one approach for the three year old stepping out into the traffic and another for the college student who wants to learn to drive. Like parenting or driving, switching styles makes sense but it also takes practice. But with practice, it soon becomes automatic.

One cautionary note for managers is that they may want to share the fact that they are learning to 'switch' to an innovation management style with their staff so the staff doesn't misdiagnose the activity as a personality disorder and start looking for a company with more stable leadership.

The three steps to innovation management set out below are clear, simple and achievable now. They build on skill sets already in place and much of the time are asking busy managers to do less not more. Simply 'LEAD' (which you do now), EMPOWER (which you are probably working on) and 'GET OUT of the WAY' (which should 'lead' to less work for you and better results for your innovators).

LEAD

1. Understand the key differences between innovation projects and regular work. (We can't lead and control what we don't understand.)
2. Ensure that project teams understand the differences between innovation and regular projects and that they are up to date on the latest techniques to manage them.
3. Ensure that your teams know that you know the differences between innovation and regular work and that those differences will be reflected in your approach and expectations.
4. Lead and nurture innovation,
    a. Remind managers and staff that innovation is a default setting for most of us.
    b. Remind managers and staff that we have been trained to turn innovation off at work.
    c. Remind managers and staff that innovation is not always ok. We need a 'two handed approach' – innovate with one hand while we continue to follow critical procedures with the other (i.e. gas fitter standards).
    d. Reassure managers and staff that you are accountable for the delivery of clarity around where and when each hand is appropriate.
    e. Keep monitoring/managing/directing regular work (right hand) **but …** for left handed 'I' projects:
        i. Start supporting and coaching.
        ii. Stop criticising – start asking for more!

(See also tips under 'Empower'.)

5. Be clear so you can get clear!
    a. Set clear goals, roles, scope, priorities, challenges and expectations.
    b. Be accountable,
        i. Articulate what you need, want and can live with.
        ii. Talk about failure, your tolerance for iterations and the 'exit' strategies.
6. Play Favourites! Pre-assign your key innovators (change agents) to critical 'I' projects.
7. Inspire your teams to:
    a. Celebrate small victories.
    b. Expect setbacks.
    c. Help them trust you to trust them to find innovative solutions.
    d. Settle for 'better' not 'perfect' - 'optimal' not 'ideal'.
    e. Stay 'Agile' - Welcome iterations and watch for opportunities.
    f. Look for higher quality from accelerated changes and iterations rather than from more research, risk analysis and information. (Ban 'get back to me' management.)
    g. Monitor your progress – give yourself feedback. *

EMPOWER

"If you lead and empower you will engage …"
author unknown

1. Keep innovation 'alive' at work,
    a. Think critically but don't criticise – instead:
        i. Affirm the progress.
        ii. Question the practices, progress and results.
        iii. Share your concerns.
        iv. Ask for more.
2. Empower your innovators to act,
    a. Delegate responsibility and authority to act.
    b. Give them committed resources.
    c. Build in 'hot lines' to senior decision makers.
    d. Give them your assurance that you trust them to find innovative solutions.
3. Empower your teams to risk innovation,
    a. Give them permission to risk, iterate and fail.
    b. Give them limits – what actions can they approve, what processes are off limits - how many iterations are acceptable – how many failures – how big can the failures be?
    c. Give them protection - from ripple effects, premature criticism and "friendly fire".
    d. Give them room to explore 'inductive' and 'abductive'** opportunities – 'Post-it' notes were just bad adhesives – steam engines were novelties that helped the occasional ship in a tight harbour.
4. Empower your innovators with professional project management practices, i.e. Project Management Institute (PMI) 'agile' project management techniques.
5. Empower and recharge for the next innovation project,
    a. Celebrate both the innovations and the innovators.
    b. Celebrate both success and best efforts.

GET OUT OF THE WAY!

Get Clear! Negotiate and set clear goals, scope, limits, milestones, reporting protocols - once you are clear; stay informed, stay engaged but stay clear.
Keep informed, stay engaged, but 'hands off' by calling for and monitoring professional project management practices.
Communicate, Communicate, Communicate – Build two-way communication that is fast, frequent and focused! ***

* For an extreme example hit Google or Wiki under 'Scrums'.
** Abductive reasoning - the ability to apply the logic of what might be: Jeanne Liedtka.
*** Wondering if you are applying the 'Three Steps' more effectively? Use the tips as a trouble shooting and assessment tool by just turning the statements into questions and asking your innovators to rate them! For example 3) Communicate, Communicate, Communicate becomes, 'Is two way communication between management and our innovation team fast, frequent and focused? Score as, needs improvement, acceptable, excellent.

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Sites to See

Geomatics Employment

http://gisjobs.ca

The Geomatics Employment web site provides online tools to help find GIS, Remote Sensing, CAD, and Mapping related jobs by connecting employers with qualified job seekers. The site is free for both job seekers and employers, although some of the recommended sites and resources may require some basic fees.