PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Building Innovation Capability in a Global Professional Services Firm

CASE CONTEXT

An experienced leader is charged with extending product offerings as part of a larger innovation effort. Her group uses various strategies to encourage new ideas from across the employee network. Now, innovation and cross-functional product development is part of the firm's success.

FEMALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERS LEVERAGE NETWORKS TO DO 5 THINGS

Based on 20 years of research in more than 300 organizations, we know that the quality of your professional relationship play a significant role in your success. We have extended this research to describe the way high-performing leaders leverage their networks to: Innovate, Execute, Scale, Thrive and Adapt.

INNOVATE   EXECUTE

SCALE   THRIVE   ADAPT

Gabriela has been in consulting for 25 years, first working on highly technical, large scale projects and, later, identifying ways to apply capability or technology to new clients or markets. Her experience connecting knowledge across internal groups led to her current work as a manager in the company's innovation incubator, with a focus on products. "How do we collaborate and innovate across the firm? How do we have a forward look into markets and industries, evolve with the markets and build what is going to be needed? How do we build capability across the firm to make those things happen?"

The innovation incubator group includes over 1,000 people in roles across the globe, but the work pulls in people and ideas from every level and group within the business. "Our work is to identify, nurture and scale innovation … We have incredibly talented people here; they need opportunities to share their great ideas and connect to the need." One way Gabriela's team fosters innovation is through a competition to pitch an idea to senior management. Anyone can participate, from interns to employees who have been with the company 20 or 30 years. The winning ideas are resourced: "They get dollars, time and support … Later, they report back and we celebrate success." Importantly, the competition, the ideas and the people are promoted through internal communication. "It lets everyone see that we are investing in ideas … Before, we would never hear about these ideas and people didn't have an opportunity or feel safe to pursue interesting side projects or new ideas."

The context and culture for innovation has been strengthening over time. "At first, I had to reach out to people I knew were doing interesting things, but now it's very successful." Good ideas flow into the incubation group. Innovation and collaboration across groups or specialties is increasingly common. Innovation is talked about and rewarded—which encourages current employees and is also a positive point for recruiting. Competition winners and innovative solutions are featured prominently on the company's web site and showcase the opportunities employees have to make a difference. The company even supports good ideas that may not become revenue generators; some are solutions to social or community issues or adaptations of IP that work for nonprofit or educational groups. "We realized we need great ideas and a culture that encourages them. Our employees are motivated. They want to do these things … Our challenge was to get mechanisms to place."

Gabriela's group also strategically identifies where they need to invest for innovation. Her technical teams partner with the business units to build relationships and know what clients and commercial partners are doing. They have a market sensing and research group that studies factors that are shaping technology or driving needs. "As a company, we want to be thinking and building 3-5 years out. It is one of our responsibilities to know where things are going in strategic areas, so we will be experts in the field and have solutions when it comes to fruition."

The process of developing an idea becomes a way to build individual talent as well. Employees get practice pitching a product or solution and gain confidence from engaging with leaders at different levels or different places in the company. Competition winners are also assigned strategic mentors and work with a peer network of high performers. The exposure to well-connected and well-placed people across different sectors creates a valuable network. "The pitch process itself takes a lot time, but people realize how they benefit and they appreciate it … The visibility and access and support they gain from senior business leaders, colleagues and clients is big for them and their careers."

Once a product or service set is created and piloted, the challenge is to move it into the rest of the organization. "A killer point is to move from a small, local idea into the heads of others. How do you get into play?" Gabriela's group created a product information tool—an app that presents solutions in real time for consultants to use with clients. The app gives a high-level review of products and examples of how they have been used successfully. It sparks interest and then steers the consultant to additional resources as needed. "With a simple search, they can say, *We did this with this client and the benefit was X* … That has been incredibly powerful." Product managers are motivated to provide the content for the app so their solutions gain greater exposure and consultants have sales incentives to use the app.

As a result of the innovation competition and other mechanisms that push innovation and pull people into creative work, the firm is better equipped to adapt and remain a leader in its field. It has developed new products and generated revenue in new ways. "We are cross-selling and getting things to market quicker … And, we are doing cool stuff."

Network Insights

- **Build an innovation capability that stimulates emergence of ideas from a broad network.** To get interest and involvement from time-pressed, overloaded employees, communicate the benefits of bringing ideas forward, involve people already working on cutting-edge ideas and set the tone for risk taking and innovation.

- **Use a pitch and idea-development process that creates rich networks for employees and teams.** People will invest energy and discretionary time when they see the benefits to their career: a reputation for expertise, connections with people in other expertise domains, sponsorship and mentorship by senior leaders and peer networks with other high performers.

- **Find ways to make successful innovation broadly visible and able to be applied.** Communicate and create resources at the right level of abstraction so people know what's most important and can confidently apply or recommend an innovative product or approach.

4 Relationships to Cultivate for Creativity

Gabriela mentors others to build four types of relationships to support creative work and innovative outcomes:

1. **Peers.** "You have to have trusted, respected relationships with peers to be successful … to have a trusted space to bounce ideas around and know who has different perspectives, capacity, issues or access."

2. **Senior leaders.** "Reach up, but also reach up and out to senior leaders outside of your market or business. How does their work relate to yours? … Get to know people through a combination of work and social. It comes down to genuinely liking people … Then, you can more easily tell them what you have been doing and tie ideas and innovation to their interests."

3. **Cross-section of expertise.** "You need to initiate conversations broadly … Figure out who else you need to talk to." When this is not done well and early on, you miss out on ideas and prevent full buy-in from people you need for the innovation to succeed.

4. **External audiences.** Clients, partners, industry experts and others outside your sphere can inform and polish ideas. "You should have external relationships within your function or industry to share ideas." Associations and LinkedIn are ways to keep up, be recognized for your expertise and build those relationships. Tests, trial runs and prototypes are also helpful for getting feedback.

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