PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Initiating & Incubating a New Service Offering in a Global Technology Organization

CASE CONTEXT

A product manager creates an environment for innovative thinking within his team and gives them time and space for ideas to take shape. He has learned to use the network strategically to solve problems and deliver new services in a global technology firm.

MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: TECHNOLOGY

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

Randall is an established manager at a global technology firm. He's been on the business side and the product side, worked with customer- and vendor-facing projects, and managed large departments and small teams. Currently, he manages a team of a dozen people who do specialized product work. When a problem of customer satisfaction emerged with a process Randall's group owned, they started asking questions. "Why are customers so annoyed with us? Why are they adopting this new product so slowly?"

The challenge initially presented itself as a known problem. Customer satisfaction was a clear problem across product lines and all along the customer experience. "Everyone was thinking about that in their individual space … In our group, we tackled it by looking at where customers were in the on-boarding process with the new product." Coincidentally, Randall's team "inherited" some code that had been developed for a project that had been scrapped. In a meeting of Randall's project managers and developers, someone wondered if the code could be applied to analyze the customer on-boarding data. By creating this space for idea generation, Randall's team saw the confluence of two very different pieces of work, and a group of five people pursued the idea. It turned out that larger customers were further along and much more satisfied than smaller customers. In fact, half of the small customers who tried to convert to the new product never got through the process. "Wow! That's bad … Something was seriously busted."

The question turned to *why* and the team realized that the process of getting help wasn't clear, easy or economical for this group of small customers. Again, Randall's perspective on problem solving opened the door for an innovative solution. "We uncovered this problem and felt passionate about solving it. We needed to do better or we would lose to the competitor. I felt safe and that we had permission to experiment … We could be open and innovative, so what could we do?" Again, a confluence of unrelated ideas sparked a possible solution. One person learned of a tool another industry uses for customer service, which got the team thinking completely outside of the company's current systems. "*What? How does that work? … Could we build that kind of thing for our customers?*" At the same time, Randall had been mulling over the Uber phenomenon and its business model based on a network. "We called it the Uber moment: could we leverage an ecosystem of independent actors to help us on-board customers faster, easier and cheaper? … That small team rallied around that question."

Randall floated the idea to other parts of the organization, but no one was interested. Looking back, he realizes people said *no* for various reasons: the pitch wasn't compelling; the idea could threaten current processes; small customers weren't their focus. Even so, Randall kept the space for the idea to develop. "When I first started talking about it, I only half-believed it. *This could be really great or really stupid. I can't tell* … But, there was a guy on my team who got this in his head and wouldn't let go." That tenacity is often a challenge to manage, but in this case, it enabled the idea to move forward.

Randall allowed the idea to mature, giving his expert "room to run." He built a prototype—something that could be set up on the platform that Randall's team owns—to access the small customers directly. "It was an insane idea … The prototype gave us a way to bypass the usual system. We said, *OK, let's take 10 calls*. We did that and started to understand who they are and how to help." The prototype allowed for experimentation and refining of the idea—and the potential impact became clear. "It was hard to believe or disbelieve the concept … When I saw a customer click that button, we took the call, it worked—then I saw what I hadn't seen before."

The team progressively scaled the work, moving from batches of 10 to 50 to 100. The solution evolved and, with success came visibility. When a vice president got involved, the prototype and the experimentation gave proof of concept. "He was curious and didn't stop us." Randall convinced a customer-service manager to train a small group to trial the new idea with 1,000 additional customers. Then he contracted outside of the company to test the viability of using a broad network of teams.

As the service's viability was established, the on-boarding metrics improved. The scope was then expanded to address a range of needs for small customers. Eventually, the project was pulled into another specialty area, where the work would be scaled globally. "To get to more volume, we had to make that change. It was a good decision—my team is better at starting and incubating things; they are better at scaling." While Randall and his team have moved on to other challenges, they take pride in the fact that they solved the on-boarding dilemma and made a major contribution to customer satisfaction.

Network Insights

- **Create/force space in early problem-solving interactions for connections to be made between adjacent or sometimes seemingly non-related concepts or areas of expertise.**

- **Leverage external connections and be prepared for an idea or insight to emerge from a random interaction or person.**

- **Look to protect ideas in early stages from either negative input or political posturing that could derail a solution before true viability is established.**

- **Prototype early and bring to constituents for feedback and to prove idea viability.**

- **Scale incrementally to build the case, learn by doing and attract political support and resources.**

Initiating & Protecting an Innovative Idea in a Large Organization

1. Idea generation can come from anyone. "Ideas can come from very improbable people and in very improbable places." Prior knowledge or expertise is not needed. Be open to ideas and look for how insights can combine.

2. Assumptions and perceived constraints keep you from seeing possibilities. Battle this by creating "greenfield moments," as you pursue innovation and protect ideas from being squashed. "Create those moments of freedom … Work with the idea that you have no burden or baggage to close your minds … No mental constraints."

3. Prototypes help you see and understand what's possible. Create a prototype early on as a way to get the team clear on what might work, but more importantly as a way to engage external stakeholders (e.g., leaders, other areas your work might impact, etc.). "When you just talk about it you can't really see it."

4. It's hard to know a good idea from a bad idea. Don't winnow them out too quickly, even when doubt exists. "You will be tempted to say an idea is stupid and then move on … Let people run with things."

5. People and projects need to be protected from negative signals and obstacles. Others will say, *It won't work, You are infringing on my territory, You are spending time off the core mission*. Be prepared for negativity and go under the radar screen to let something develop. "The culture of overcoming external obstacles is very deep in this part of the business … They won't stop you from doing things you think are right."

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