PRODUCE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

A Senior Technical Expert Develops & Implements a Services Innovation to Strengthen Strategic Capability

CASE CONTEXT

A respected and seasoned senior engineer leads cross-functional innovation to boost the company's services business. He builds his teams based on years of experience leading both product and services innovation.

MALE

Level: INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR

Industry: HIGH-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

Stephan is an influential technical leader, building on nearly 20 years of innovation and product development with a
global technology company. He forged his career on the engineering path, rather than moving up the managerial ranks, and was named a distinguished engineer nine years ago. He is currently in charge of the technology strategy of the services segment of the company, working with engineering teams and top leaders to identify and implement innovations.

Recently Stephan led a team that cut across the boundaries of the historically divided technical support and consulting functions. "There was little cross-sharing or cross-collaboration. Our challenge initially was how can we capture the diverse intellectual capital that is created within each group and apply or reuse it for other parts of the business?" For example, if an engineer solved a problem for a customer, how could that solution be captured, communicated and used repeatedly? Taking it another step, are there solutions or knowledge components that could be packaged and sold as part of a product offering? "This was about leveraging knowledge for efficiency and productivity and revenue."

The spark for the idea came when a new vice president challenged Stephan's group to think about the services business in non-traditional ways. "She wanted us to think bigger. She said, *We don't make things. We make knowledge. It is like I'm managing a walking encyclopedia, so how do we maximize the impact of what we produce?* It was a very open-ended question. We could take it any different direction." Stephan and his team had a "keen appreciation of the question" because of the way the VP engaged the group. It was not seen as a directive or pet project from a newcomer. She positioned the idea in a way that fed into their sense of identity, belonging and significance—which increased the odds of them accepting the challenge, making it their own and pushing ahead. "We thought, *This person understands us! She gets what we are after and what we do every day* … The challenge was framed as something meaningful."

Stephan began to answer the question by seeking diverse perspectives. "If we have the chance to make a material impact, I wanted to think of the larger state of possibilities." First, he reached out to a broad group of engineers, holding a virtual session to pose the challenge and explore ideas. From there, a few experts emerged as thought leaders and were added to the core team. "These were the people who were positive, not just the most vocal. There are always people who start with what they think is wrong or why an idea is doomed … We needed people who actually

understood the change a couple degrees beyond today and part of that comes with positive thinking about the possibilities." This group talked to several outside experts and sought out contributions from internal teams that would be essential for implementation. They quickly created a prototype to test their concepts. "If we have a proof of concept or pilot, that is the right time to engage the negative people … A model speaks louder and they can identify things that are useful to solve."

Meanwhile, Stephan and his vice president were in the process of gaining executive sponsorship and securing budgets. They made the case for change, giving context that the world was changing and the business needed to change, too. "The story was not to get people afraid, but to show we have a massive opportunity." Framing the narrative in terms of possibility instead of threat was key. "After a few meetings of vision and opportunity, they were bought in … Success for me was when a couple big stakeholders started telling the story for me … They would bring this up and make it their own."

With strong commitment from the team and stakeholders, the project began to take shape. The team balanced working remotely and holding intensive, two-day, in-person working sessions where they could shut down distractions and drive to concrete outcomes. Stephan credits the positivity and proactive energy of the group and a trusting, egalitarian approach as vital for fast-paced innovation. "We had an even playing field and no side agendas … A VP who manages 600 people and engineer just three years out of college had a natural interaction and gave a material contribution."

Soon, the project shifted to building and executing at scale. As more stakeholders and end-users gave input, Stephan's team continued to make incremental changes, testing and adapting the platform quickly. "We needed to evolve significantly from our early thinking … 75% of the functionality changed based on a those stakeholder meetings." In the end, the work was extremely well received, due in large part to engaging stakeholders and end-users early in the process and every step of the way.

Within a year, a new set of tools was created for servicing existing accounts, with the process and platform established to enable ongoing knowledge sharing and co-development across groups.

Network Insights

- **Engage innovation teams through *belonging* and *significance*.** Positioning an idea in this way dramatically increases odds that people will commit to a challenge.

- **Bring in key internal parties early to explore the problem space.** First, engage as many people as possible, then narrow the core team to people who are proactive and positive. This allows ideas to take shape and strengthen, rather than be killed off too soon by negativity or political posturing.

- **Secure stakeholder commitment with a story-based narrative, as well as the pure business case.** Engage others through the lens of possibility rather than threat.

- **Focus team collaboration on concrete outcomes.** Set up team processes and build culture to maximize co-creation.

- **Prototype early and bring to constituents for feedback and to prove idea viability.** Iterate with stakeholders to refine content and boost interest in the evolving solutions.

Collaborative Practices that Enable Innovation

Stephan has learned important lessons over his nearly 20 years developing and managing products and service innovations.

1. *Bring in diverse perspectives early to define problem space.* Leverage direct and indirect network contacts, internally as well as external networks (e.g., industry associations and peers in other organizations). Approach diversity in terms of ideas and expertise to "think of a larger state of possibilities, beyond what you see today."

2. *Foster ownership and purpose early to engage best efforts.* Innovation is more likely to hit the mark when ideation and development is diffused and contributors have pride of ownership. "People willingly invest nights and weekends if they believe in the change or the pursuit and want to be a part of it. Innovation is co-creation."

3. *Build teams with chemistry.* Great collaborative outcomes are generated when people share values around the work. "The best collaborators have affinity for each other … They want to be together … They have a sense of, *This is meaningful and I can change the world and I am positive and happy*. Humor, too, is an immense part of it."

4. *Encourage ideas and creative friction—but drive quickly to a prototype or test case.* Advance an idea early and rapidly: "You need to get ideas into play and not hold back a prototype until perfect." This matters for proof of concept to get funding and stakeholder support, as well as for engagement of ultimate end users.

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