

Free your mind

Professor Richard Potter has some unconventional techniques for encouraging innovative thinking. He explains to Emma Clarke how a mix of relaxation and motivation can stimulate creativity

Innovation should be a way of life for every part of the business, says Professor Richard Potter. It has to be integral not just to the work of scientists at innovation specialists such as defence technology and security firm QinetiQ, where he was head of business processes, but to every organisation and every business function. And that includes procurement. Innovation doesn't just lead to new and improved products, but also to better business processes that ensure competitive advantage.

Potter is the first to admit, however, that making innovation happen is easier said than done. To hit upon the kernel of a great idea and then nurture it into a bestselling product or a new way of working relies on a number of elements, including environment, supportive management, the right mix of people and, most of all, a company-wide motivation to succeed.

The first step is encouraging people to understand how innovation and creativity occur. "The seed corn of innovation is good ideas and the essence of them comes from networking, conversations and interactions.

"If you talk to the same old people all the time, the group think sets in and you all end up thinking the same way. But through a conversation, a meeting or taking an interest in what's outside your normal domain, your mind will be stimulated to look at things from a different perspective."

This means people in business - whether from purchasing, accounts, marketing or sales - must get out more. "People need to describe their jobs to someone who does something completely different and then learn about what they do." For procurement this doesn't have to be other functional departments - it could be the people who receive the goods they purchase.

Storm warning

But, he cautions, don't be tempted to schedule regular networking meetings, organise innovation sessions or set targets. As soon as you try to formalise anything the creativity stagnates.

Even conventional techniques such as brainstorming can thwart the creative process. When Potter was researching knowledge management at QinetiQ, he decided to take staff out of the working environment to promote creative thought.

Rather than brainstorming, he wanted to create a brain-stilling experiment. Most great ideas happen when you are at home, or relaxed.

Instead of being told they had to come up with some ideas by four o'clock, the team of 12 spent a couple of days in a converted barn with food and drink. He gave them three questions to think about and discuss when eating or while washing up. "The thing about creating a domestic environment is that silence becomes acceptable. This is not something that happens at work, where it is seen to be unproductive time."

Changing attitudes

Innovation is already a way of life to the thousands of scientists at QinetiQ. But, he says, to other professions such as purchasers, creative working may seem more alien.

"Functional specialists must meet requirements such as contract law, which means a focus on control and conformity rather than looking for ways to improve processes. There's also a tendency to support the status quo. This is something management has to continually challenge."

According to Potter, innovation is about fostering the right attitude. This means managers at all levels play an important role in supporting and motivating staff. Too many great ideas get killed off because the boss hasn't got the time or the inclination to follow it through. "If someone comes to you with an idea, and you can't see how to use it, don't turn it down. Put it up on the board with the person's name next to it. You may not be able to do anything with it at the moment, but somebody may build on it in the future. If you don't encourage staff, you will never get the second idea. And it may be the second, third or even the tenth idea that is the valuable one."

Bringing a new idea to fruition is also going to take time and managers need to help nurture this difficult process. "You've got to develop an idea and then sell it. To do that," he says, "you need somebody who will sponsor you and support you."

Employees need to believe in the company they work for, he says. "Staff need to feel valued and know what they do is worthwhile. If they want the company to succeed, then they are more likely to sell their great idea and get people to recognise the value of what they are saying."

But to believe in the success of the organisation, employees can't sit in isolation. It's about recognising the value that everybody in the business can bring and how different groups define success.

"It is the links between different people that make the business go, not the fact that you've got 10,000 people sitting in isolation with in-depth knowledge. If they remain isolated then you can't create anything."

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Procurement needs to understand how it affects the rest of the business. For example, it must understand that a procedure to drop suppliers from a list of approved vendors when they haven't been used for 10 months may affect someone in the business who only buys a product every two years.

Purchasers must also be aware that the chief executive is fired up by the share prices, and needs to understand that procurement is motivated by working with suppliers to create savings.

Making connections

Potter acknowledges that not every member of staff can know everything about a large business. But it is important to make sure that connections exist and those eager to innovate are free to do so. "There will always be people who don't want to innovate and who would rather follow a project through to the end. Innovation will come from those who are slightly restless and feel that we could be doing better."

Creating more efficient ways of working through innovation doesn't necessarily mean jobs will disappear. "If a company encourages staff to think about how they can help generate value then they could turn the business round," he says. "It could mean more jobs in procurement."

The secret is not to start with a huge company-wide initiative. "Try something local and see if you can grow it. Others in the organisation will soon start to wonder why a team is always smiling."

Emma Clarke is a freelance business journalist.

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