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Tips to innovate more effectively

Here are some ideas from panellists at the recent BRW Momentum Series.

1. Jason Sew Hoy, COO of 99designs.com, highlighted the importance of having and sharing a clear vision. It's especially vital when the number of people on a project increases well beyond the initial team who all originally shared the dream.
2. Inventium founder, Dr Amantha Imber, notes how it is less risky to make important decisions early in the day, while people are still fresh. Decision making fatigue can be an unrecognised innovation risk.
3. GE Capital's MD, Distribution Finance, Simon Beckett, highlights the cost effectiveness of crowd sourcing software for prioritising and evaluating innovations. It's also a great way to alert others to what's going on and identify the innovation champions of particular initiatives.
4. Nick Armstrong, founder and CEO of COZero (which grew 604% last year!) urges people to get far enough away, for a time, to refresh perspective. The right conference overseas is a key source of his inspiration.

ARE YOU FAILING OFTEN ENOUGH TO ACHIEVE YOUR POTENTIAL?

First steps...

We've never met anyone who loves failing, have you? Truth is, our brains tend to become wired in ways which makes us prefer to avoid failure. Usually, failing is associated with pain. Success, on the other hand, pairs with pleasure. It's a no-brainer which state most people choose in a forced-choice situation.

Yet, so much of who we are and what we've achieved stems at least in equal part from failure as from success. Not that you remember it, but reflect back on the effort and drive it will have required to successfully take your very first steps on two legs. Learning how to communicate and being understood took much longer and needed even greater effort. Those significant successes were built on a vast platform of prior failures.

Few of those early failures came from radical initiatives. Mostly, they were incremental. Progress was iterative – you were sorting out what worked from what didn't. It wasn't just the clichéd 'try and try again until you succeed'.

Doing exactly the same thing and hoping for a different outcome is quickly identified as a wasted way of spending time and energy without making progress. Rather, as you tried again and again, you did things slightly differently. Iterations brought minor improvements that, in their totality, contributed to the successful outcomes you were seeking.

Interestingly, as you applied that learning process more widely, it is largely the successes that are remembered. The many accompanying failures (or stepping-stones) are forgotten.

Not failing enough?

Organisations can be very much like people in this way. Success is important and, no doubt, often tightly bound up with 'brand'. You prefer that minor slip-ups don't happen and are likely terrified of an organisation-induced major calamity.

A key reason is that kind of 'bad news' attracts and sells media or, at the very least, unwanted attention. Even reading about stories of organisational failure is likely to plant subtle but strong suggestions that failure can be very expensive. Take for example the currently beleaguered G4S, suppliers of London Olympics security. You wouldn't want any part in that current and unfolding fiasco!

We do get caught up by those extreme cases, where failure is terminal. But are those fears, with such a low probability of affecting your organisation, worthy of the status you afforded them? Yet, as GE Capital's Simon Beckett so accurately put it recently at the BRW Momentum Series, "it's like crawling

over broken glass to get things done in large organisations". Most, in even relatively small organisations, would identify strongly with Beckett's metaphor. Largely, it's about aversion to risk and anything that might challenge the status quo.

Reframing success and failure

It might be helpful to reframe the scenario. Shouldn't organisations be far more fearful of *not* making the innovations of which they're capable? Indeed, they ought to be concerned that incremental change doesn't happen because of aversion to risk.

Few stop to consider that the risk of standing still may in reality be greater than the risk of innovating. All too often these sluggish organisations are unable to respond adequately when the warning signs suddenly become crystal clear. By then, it's too late to become interested in innovating. The ultimate cost for earlier stagnation is beyond anything previously contemplated.

This is a particularly present issue for the many organisations being challenged by game-changing shifts in entire industries. Moving from industrial- to knowledge- oriented businesses is very challenging. It's also risky. Not moving though is extremely short sighted. Those who mistakenly think they're not affected may be in the most danger because they just won't see the nasty hit coming.

Two sides of the same coin

Success and failure are mostly two sides of the same coin. A string of failures, followed by innovation and persistence, often leads to a measure of success. On the other hand, success itself has often also been a key precursor for failure. Organisations are understandably drawn to keep doing what made them successful – remembering and repeating only the final steps. If they reflected more deeply, they'd recognise how their success was as much about the means as it was about the end.

Importantly, success is usually born from continuously trying different things (that may not always work) and learning from past efforts to make future improvements. It's a key characteristic of start-ups, which is why Dr Amantha Imber of Inventium advises organisations, regardless of size or maturity, to start thinking like start-ups again.

Play the innovation card...often!

Take a few moments to think about how you relate to success and failure. Do you prefer to venture little and gain little? Or, are you willing to take measured risks, accept some failure and then repeat the cycle until the sum of your successes exceeds the sum of all failures? The latter option may test your resilience, but it will also give you the best chance of sustained success.