Enabling Innovation

"One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time." André Gide

And therein lies the rub. Most managers will agree that innovation, which used to be required for developing and maintaining competitive advantage, is now essential for just survival. But the same 'most managers' are also concerned with the need for control – and it is impossible to have both at the same time. So a key question is about how to unlock the contradiction, and ensure that innovative developments are aligned with strategic direction. First, consider some of the challenges to much conventional thinking.

The Designed Organisation

Organisation design mainly concerns strategy, structure and process. The idea is that strategy provides direction; structure distributes power; and process distributes tasks. The overall aim is to achieve stability, predictability and repeatability. All of that is to ensure that the strategy will be delivered. The problem is that when it is realised that the business environment is very turbulent, there is a demand that people innovate. The implication is that people are being asked to produce instability, unpredictability and un-repeatability in an organisation designed to produce the exact opposite. And when they fail to deliver the required innovation, complaints are uttered about their lack of creativity and inability to innovate!

Command and control management styles

Telling people what to do and then checking up often, these days generally accompanied by lots of KPIs, is a well worn but still popular approach to managing – and control. The evidence suggest that it has never been successful in delivering high performance[1], but its application to innovation is a logical non-runner. There are two dimensions to innovation. The first is an act of creativity – thinking of a new way of doing something. The second is the transformation of the new idea into action – someone has to do something that has never been done before.

The first cannot be commanded. The creative idea generally comes from reflection, often about a problem or opportunity, and in organisations most often arises when two or more people come together to share their knowledge and ideas in pursuit of some sort of performance improvement. The second is a matter of organisational climate – is it safe to try to new ways of working, knowing that all such ventures are, by definition, risky? What will happen if an idea is tried and fails? What follows next might be shared learning, but it might be retribution! If it is the latter, say goodbye to innovation.

Organisational permissions

Exhortation does little to change behaviour. By contrast, permissions are the unwritten, unspoken messages contained in the design of organisation structures and processes, (as suggested above), and in the acts of individual managers, especially the senior variety. For example, an excess focus on short term numbers, or too many management interventions in operational issues and decisions, are both sure-fire killers of innovation. The approach that works is for managers to seek negative, constraining permissions and replace them with positive, enabling permissions – specifically those that make it OK to test new ways of working, in the knowledge that what would follow failure would be shared learning, not retribution.

All of which leads to the conclusion that innovation can be enabled, but not managed. So, the challenge is how to develop an innovation-enabling organisation. Fortunately, the challenge also contains the solution.

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1   Managing by the evidence ~ McKinsey 2006
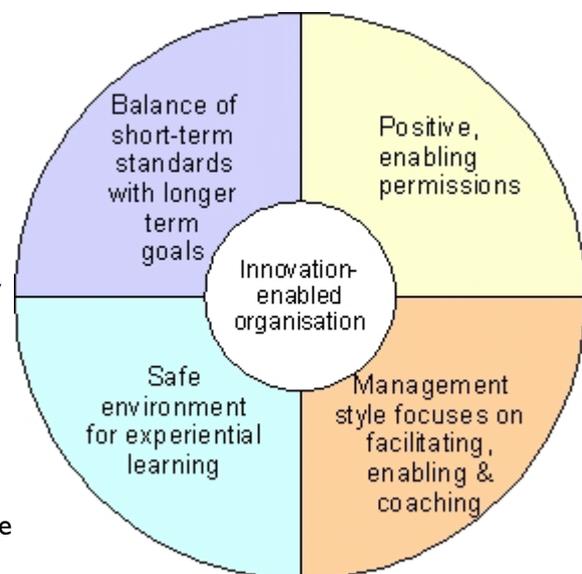
Enabling innovation and control

The clue is in how people from different parts of the organisation come together to resolve problems or capitalise on opportunities. They share their knowledge, create new solutions and, in doing so, create new knowledge. The outcomes of such networks of agents coming together are not predictable, and not controllable. There are, however, natural control mechanisms that apply to all such self-organising groups. These are natural survival, experiential learning and limited ability to dispose of large resources.

Since the conditions required to enable innovation are well known, the trick is to provide groups of people with information on which of those conditions currently exist and which do not – and then provide them with a safe opportunity to agree and implement actions that will move the organisation closer to the desired state. Since these actions will, in themselves, be innovative, the innovation cycle starts there are then. The process drives towards a new form of emergent order, that, in turn, enables ongoing innovation.

Magus Networker

Creating the conditions for innovation is one of the key goals that Magus Networker was designed to achieve. Stimulating and enabling innovation that is coherent and self-organising is another. Creating developmental actions that do not encounter resistance is a fundamental characteristic of all Networker applications.

Conventionally, Magus Networker is custom-configured by the user for each problem resolution / organisational development application. Now the developers of Magus Networker have designed an application specifically targeting the issue of developing an enabling innovation. This is in the form of a template that can, however, still be adapted to the specific needs of each organisation. The Magus Networker process uses front-end analysis to enable this adaptation, and the design of the group.

The design of the 'enabling innovation' application uses extensive research into the creation of conditions that enable innovation. It deals with both systemic and cultural drivers of emergent order, with the question set focused very specifically on innovation.

As with all Magus Networker applications, the information generated is self-validating – it is beyond challenge. Faced with a 'real-world' description of the current state, people develop insights that enable hidden heroes to be identified; gaps in information and communication networks to be located; blockages to innovation to be actioned. As organisational constraints on innovation are identified by a process of cross-functional review, the conditions needed for innovative problem resolution are automatically in place.

Magus Networker is part of a complete methodology for resolving organisational problems and developing greater performance. It handles complex data sets with ease, providing powerful insights into the nature of the problem, and its causes. It does this through graphical reports presented as network charts, that illuminate all the complex working relationships, formal and informal, that actually drive organisational performance. The Magus Networker process enables many people to be engaged, through open dialogue, with their attention focused on the issues, causes and actions illuminated through the network charts.

As with all Magus Networker applications, the process is fast, requiring weeks, not months. Developmental action flows automatically from the analyses for cause. These actions include those taken by delegates to the Magus Networker workshops, and by the people in management roles who sponsored the process. By default, priorities are determined according to the goals agreed at the start of the process.

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