



**CUSTOMER
MANUFACTURING
GROUP**

MANAGING FOR INNOVATION THE ONLY SUSTAINABLE ADVANTAGE

FOUR STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL INNOVATION TEAMS

Creators don't
follow tradition...

Advancers give a
team purpose...

Refiners are the
'devil's advocate'...

Executors think
things over
carefully ...

Do you know
which you are?

Innovation is critical to the competitive success of virtually all companies. Whether you're on the leading edge, or following an imitation strategy, innovation is the only sustainable competitive advantage. Creativity and innovation are often used as synonyms terms. This is unfortunate because there is much more to true innovation than just being creative. This paper examines a proven, four-step process that allows you to have successful, repeatable innovation as part of your company's portfolio of skills.

Creativity Is Not Innovation

Innovation is the transformation of creative ideas into tangible, practical products, services, or business practices. Those ideas can come from inside your firm, or they can be ideas that have been successfully adapted from elsewhere. The key is understanding that even the best ideas are meaningless until and unless they are actually implemented.

Unfortunately, knowledge alone doesn't necessarily or automatically lead to the actions required to result in implementation. An unimplemented idea is meaningless and useless.

Given the critical importance of innovation, it's imperative that companies find a predictable, repeatable process that can assure dependable innovation. Remember, coming up with the idea is just the beginning. It's not an innovation until it is reduced to practice.

Substantial evidence from theoretical, as well as from real world research, demonstrates that effective and efficient innovation requires the joint efforts of a team of people. Managing the interactions of these diverse people to assure a profitable result is complex. You must match the knowledge, expertise, thinking styles, action-taking methods, and risk aversion of the available pool of people to a process that can assure execution of the innovation.

Innovation Is A Process

To achieve success in managing for innovation, you must acknowledge that innovation is a process. Further, to be successful, a method must be identified to manage that process and the people involved. Integrating the right set of people skills into a proven process results in effective innovation.

So what is a proven innovation process? Investigation into innovation methods has evolved a technique for describing a four-step process that results in innovation. The four steps can be described as: 1) creating; 2) advancing; 3) refining; and 4) implementing. Each step is discrete and necessary to assure innovation happens.

To move an idea through each of these four steps so that an innovation results, requires matching the "right" people with each step of the process. What are the characteristics of the "right" people?

Well, clearly, they must have the knowledge and expertise required to perform the needed tasks. That's no real revelation, and is usually not the problem. The difficult piece of the puzzle involves thinking style and action-taking method. By thinking style we do not mean IQ, but rather how you process information. By action-taking method we don't mean will you or won't you take action, but again, how do you go about it.

Step 1 - Creating

Let's see how these two human characteristics are important to innovation. The first step of the process is creating. In this step, ideas and concepts are generated. Often the problem will be reframed and solutions that may be unusual, unique, or that go beyond the obvious, may be identified. Fresh and original concepts are often generated. The creating step is characterized by a lack of constraints regarding existing rules or boundaries. Success in this step requires a view of the "big picture" and a mind open to alternative solutions.

People who are successful in the creating step are usually conceptual thinkers and

demonstrate an initiating action-taking method. Conceptual thinkers do not follow a predictable thinking path. Their thinking style could be accurately described as elliptical or abstract. The initiating action-taking method is succinctly described as one who is more comfortable going where no one has gone before than in following the “proven” path.

A person who is likely to perform well in the creating step can be described as someone who:

- Likes to come up with new ideas
- Is good at exploring alternatives and discussing concepts
- Is capable of realizing the master plan
- Focuses on the future
- Can easily move from one subject to another
- Can focus on many things at once
- Probably is impatient
- Likes respect and influence
- Doesn't follow tradition
- Goes with “gut feeling” when making decisions

While the creator is a wonderful source of new ideas and concepts, they often have a tendency to move quickly from idea to idea without understanding the consequences.

Step 2 - Advancing

The second step in the innovation process is the advancing step. In this step of the process the ideas and new directions conceived in the creation step are moved forward. These ideas are promoted and, using past experience and successful methods, a plan for implementation is developed.

Top performing people in this role usually prefer ideas that are familiar, but they are willing to bend rules and push beyond existing boundaries if the action can be directed forward, achieving objectives in a direct and efficient manner. They demonstrate a linear thinking style and an initiating action-taking method.

The linear thinking style is characterized by a sequential process. The linear thinker will solve the following sequence: 2, 3, 4 . . .

with the number 5. The linear thinker is usually also very able to evaluate the pros and cons . . . and will do so.

Additionally people who perform well as advancers:

- Recognize ideas and directions early
- Think of how a new idea could actually be implemented
- Are usually skeptical of new ideas, but will go with their feelings
- Give the team a purpose
- Focus on the purpose of achieving objectives efficiently
- Can easily deal with more than one thing at a time
- Like the creator, need respect and influence

Advancers can be energetic promoters of the team's objectives. Since they usually recognize the value of a new idea or concept, they will actively move it forward. However, if the only other person on the innovation team with them is a creator, these two may move new ideas through that are “half-baked” while ignoring danger signals and potential barriers to actual implementation.

Step 3 - Refining

The refining or evaluating step is the third phase in the process. Concepts are challenged in this stage. This is the “Ya but . . .” step. A methodical process of analysis is used to look for flaws or problems with the innovation ideas from the creating step. In addition, the refiner looks at the implementation plans from the advancing step to try to “poke holes” in the approach.

Sometimes the refiner will suggest new ways to solve the problem, or they may “push it back” onto the advancer or creator. The refiner is generally a conceptual thinker with an adopting action-taking method.

An adopting action-taking method is the converse of the initiating method. That is, people with this tendency will always prefer to follow the “beaten path.” In addition,

great people in the refining role:

- Believe consequences are important and therefore plan for contingencies
- Like to find a way to create order from chaos
- Are often referred to as “the devil's advocate”
- Prefer order
- Are methodical
- Gain satisfaction from the mental exercise of debate

While the refiner's role is critical to assure the concepts are well thought through, if they control the whole process they will usually lead the group toward low-risk ideas.

Step 4 - Implementing
The last, and certainly not least, step is the execution. This step takes the concepts and implements them according to the plan developed in the advancing step. The focus is on an orderly implementation that achieves a high quality outcome. Executors are linear thinkers who exhibit an adopting action-taking method. In addition, great

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executors:

- Pay attention to details
- Try to assure the plans follow an orderly process
- Are methodical
- Are cautious with new approaches
- Think things over carefully
- Finish everything they start
- Are usually uninterested in the early part of the innovation process

Successful execution requires focused objectives and guidelines. These will be natural results of the prior three steps . . . if they are done well.

Putting It Together

Finding people with the needed combination of knowledge, expertise, thinking style and action-taking method is always a challenge. Until recently the problem was further compounded by an inability to accurately understand a person's true proclivity for each role in the process.

Recently a very low cost, self-scoring instrument was developed that accurately and repeatably identifies our natural and best role in this process. (If you would like an evaluation copy of this instrument, please contact us.)

Armed with an understanding of the process, and an ability to match people to process requirements should naturally result in more successful innovation in your company.

More Information

If you would like more information about how to apply the Customer Manufacturing System to your business, give us a call at (800) 947-0140, fax us at (408) 727-3949, or e-mail us at info@customerdmfg.com.

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