

KEEPING YOU INFORMED
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Creating a Culture of Improvement and Innovation

Most Organizations are Killing Improvement and Innovation

If you are like most organizations, you may be shocked to discover that you are killing improvement and innovation. If you don't believe me, conduct your own "mini-assessment." Walk around your organization for a few days, ask yourself the following questions, and take some notes about what you see and hear. Be objective and candid about your observations.

Over the past twelve months, how many ideas has your organization implemented that help you better meet customer needs and requirements, improve a product or service, increase productivity, improve quality, reduce costs or improve the work environment? How do you systematically track and measure improvements?

Listen carefully to conversations in several work groups, departments and divisions. Do you hear leaders providing consistent encouragement and support, or do you hear a constant drumbeat of "we've always done it this way" or "that will probably cost a lot to implement" or "if it isn't broken, why fix it"?

Do you have clearly defined and measured strategic and operational goals, and improvement priorities linked to those goals? Are processes written down? Or, do people say it takes too much time, and they are too busy? Is tribal knowledge the norm? (By tribal knowledge, I mean that people tend to do things their way, and are reluctant to share how they do things or follow processes.) Or, do you have a process for sharing knowledge and best practices throughout all work groups? Are measurable improvements being made? Is performance improving?

Are the same mistakes being made over and over again? Or, are problems anticipated and prevented? Is morale high, or do people feel powerless, frustrated and burned out? Do people feel encouraged to speak up and challenge the status quo? Or do they tell the boss what s/he wants to hear because it's not worth the hassle to try and make things better?

What's going on?

If your assessment is brutally honest, you probably found several areas for improvement. You may be asking yourself: "what's going on?" My short answer is that two things may be going on.

One thing that is going on is a powerful, pervasive force to maintain the status quo. Psychologists call this phenomenon homeostasis. It is the natural tendency of a system or organization to maintain stability or equilibrium. As groups of human beings, we tend to keep things as they are – the way they normally function.

On the surface, this attitude or belief about maintaining the status quo is innocent, and even well-intentioned. We find out what is successful, and follow our natural instincts to keep doing more of the same to ensure lasting success. This phenomenon occurs in individuals, work groups, departments, divisions, organizations and entire industries. However, by following this approach, we often unknowingly and unintentionally resist the very changes that we need to make!

The competitive environment around us is constantly changing. If we don't improve at a competitive rate, we fall behind. It's a cold, hard fact that the organizations that learn, improve and innovate faster and more effectively than their competition, win. Improvement and innovation help put your organization in the best possible position to succeed.

The second thing going on is that your organizational culture may need a tune up. Your organizational culture consists of the prevailing norms, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that exist throughout your organization. Your culture establishes expectations, and influences and reinforces what people think, how they feel, and what they say and do. You and your leadership team may have the best intentions, but when your organizational culture is out of sync with these intentions, desired performance and behaviors such as improvement and innovation do not tend to follow.

Getting Started in Creating a Culture of Improvement and Innovation

There are a number of guiding principles and best practices that can help an organization create and sustain a culture of improvement and innovation. Following are three basic approaches to help you get started.

Put the right leadership team in place. Leaders set expectations and role model desired behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. Leaders must visibly demonstrate their personal commitment to improvement and innovation, and consistently expect, encourage and support people to continuously challenge the status quo, tinker with new ideas, and find a better way. Some leaders may not be a good fit for the challenge. It only takes a few people in key positions to shut down individual and team initiative. Select leaders who fit, and de-select those who don't.

Establish the infrastructure needed to support improvement and innovation. An organization must have in place an aligned and integrated performance management system, including a vision, mission, values, strategic and operational goals, measures, process improvement priorities, and a process management and performance improvement system. Without these fundamental pieces in place, you will not have the infrastructure needed to overcome the status quo.

Provide recognition, rewards, reinforcement and resources. Improvement and innovation require discretionary effort and energy, and practical tools, training and resources. Individual, team and organizational reward and recognition processes may require an overhaul. People at all levels of the organization need process management and problem solving tools and training so that they are properly equipped to contribute. Leaders also need to allocate time, encourage cross-functional teams, and do the little things needed to show day-to-day encouragement and support. The importance of these things is often over-looked, misunderstood, and under-appreciated.

You can take positive steps to change the status quo in your organization, and create a culture of improvement and innovation. A word of caution: short-term improvement programs or organizational innovation initiatives are risky approaches. In order to achieve sustained results, improvement and innovation must become institutionalized in your organizational culture. It is not easy, but the organizations that succeed at making improvement and innovation a way of life can create a competitive advantage that sets them apart from the competition.

Our mission is facilitating organizational transformation and performance improvement. If you would like to explore practical ways to help you create a culture of improvement and innovation, or discuss other aspects of improving organizational effectiveness, please contact us. © 2010 by Jeffrey H. Bracken, Bracken and Associates. All rights reserved.