

The Growing Ideas process – Innovation in a Thinking Environment

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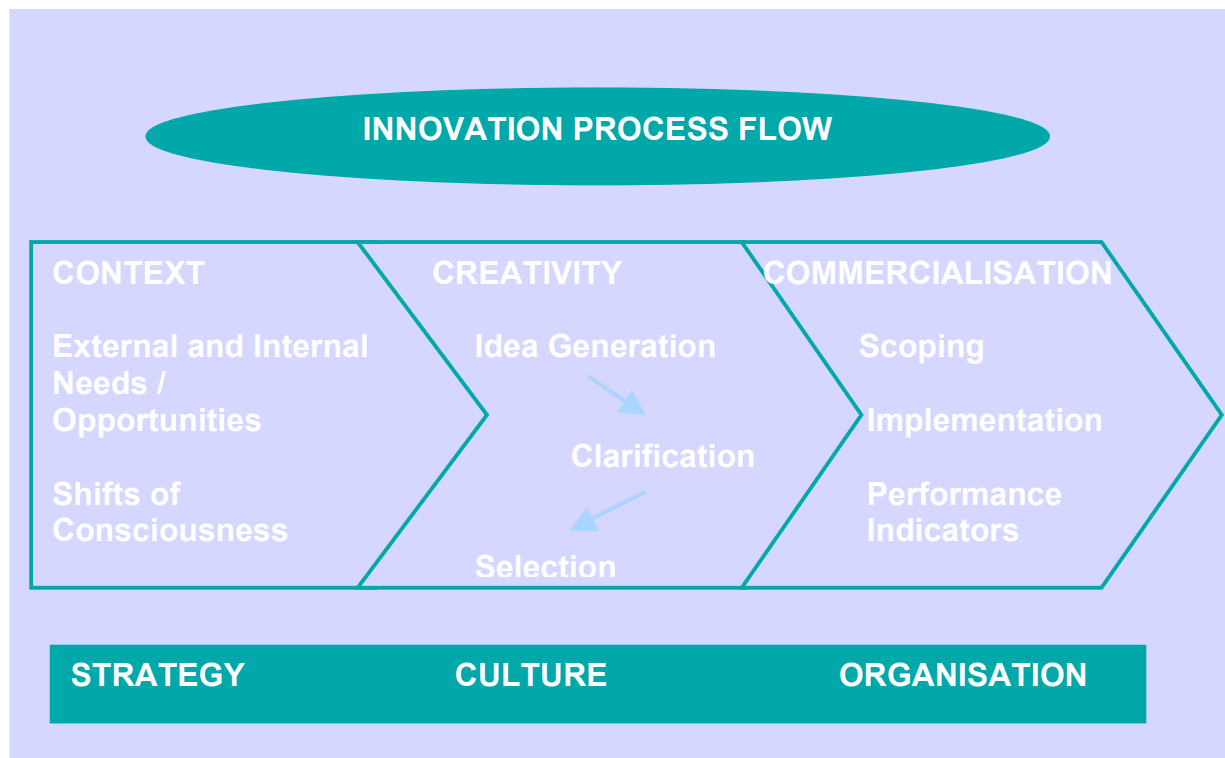
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Background

We were approached by our client; a science-based R&D section of a major, multi-national FMCG, in August 2000. They asked us to develop an approach that would increase the quality and quantity of new product concepts being brought forward for scoping and research.

Part-way through a cultural development programme, they realised they were missing out on the creativity of a major part of their workforce.

We developed the “Innovation Process Flow” model, below, as a basis for our initial discussions:



Focus

In more recent times, we have continued to work with this client in the areas of both 'Context' (focusing on Vision and Strategic Themes) and 'Commercialisation' (focusing on Action Planning for Success and Performance Measures). However, at the start we focused on the Cultural aspects of the Innovation Process as these were seen to be pivotal to the overall success of the intervention and the area that would win greatest support early on because it would involve everyone.

Approach

Over a six-month period we would:

1. Co-facilitate an open “Innovation Day” which would:
 - a. Introduce the Innovation Process Flow
 - b. Clarify blocks to creativity
 - c. Discover what would be needed to get everyone involved in the process.
 - d. Develop some creativity skills and techniques

2. Help instil a culture that would encourage people to think together by training internal trainers to deliver a tailored “Developing a Creative Thinking Environment” workshop.
(This workshop contains no creativity techniques. The 10 Components self-evidently support a creative culture and stand alone in their strength here.)

3. Develop, and deliver, a process to overcome the blocks and meet the needs identified at Step 1 and to build on the skills and mind-set instilled at Step 2 (i.e., that incorporates the 10 Components of a Thinking Environment™), within the context of the Innovation Process Flow.

Assumptions Limiting Creativity

Limiting assumptions, that stopped employees coming forward with their ideas included:

- Only senior managers are expected to think of new ideas for research.
- All ideas get a negative reception.
- They’ve “tried that before and...”
- I don’t have a PhD so my ideas aren’t worth anything.
- Nobody has the time to listen to me.
- Nothing happens to the ideas anyway
- I’m not creative.

Objectives/Design Criteria

Develop an idea-generation and capturing process:

- in which the links between ideas and the business strategy are visible and understood
- where each idea is quantified and prioritised in terms of business value
- in which people know who does what in taking ideas forward
- which allows for ongoing feedback to all suggestions
- where ideas reach the person or department who can use them
- which is capable of capturing ideas in real time (at the ‘Eureka!’ moment)
- which actively demonstrates support for creative/different thinking
- which is easy and obvious and becomes part of everyday life

Designing the Process

A crucial step in a Thinking Partnership is the Incisive Question™ that works like a laser beam in dissolving the individual thinker’s limiting assumption. All incisive questions start with the words “If you knew that..?” and then turn around the limiting assumption into its positive opposite, or something as near to this as is possible.

Once we knew the client’s limiting assumptions around creativity and idea generation; we could design a process to remove these by asking the question “For people to know that...(e.g. *all ideas are received positively here..*), what would need to be included in the process?”

The “Generating Ideas” Process

(N.B. It’s probably worth noting that the original “Growing Ideas” process was designed specifically for our client. The 4-letter abbreviation we developed for the process roles is the same as the name of the client. So, this is a generic model that ensures client confidentiality).

The people-based process was designed to support individuals developing ideas for themselves and with others and is based on the following roles or stages:

Initiators© think of ideas that can be used by the company to develop new products or services; or to improve its systems and processes.

Anyone and everyone can be an Initiator© – and the process encourages this.

Developers support the Initiator in identifying the full potential of the idea and in developing the business case for it.

Evaluators support the Initiator and the Developer in identifying any potential risks attached to the idea and in developing actions to minimise these.

Actuators support and motivate the Initiator, Developer and Evaluator in completing the business case and for taking the idea forward as far as selection and potential scoping.

Selectors develop and use a set of selection criteria which takes into account the key business influences matched with current and potential customer requirements, within a strategic context. They close the loop by providing feedback to the Initiator.

Making it Human – One consultant’s experience in facilitating the Process

*“Listening to ignite the human mind”
Nancy Kline*

I get vertigo. I hate heights and I hate not being able to trust my feet. So, you’ll understand me when I say that I’m more than a little scared of skiing down steep slopes. I only do it because it feels good at the end!

I remember the first time I decided to listen to the advice of my ski instructor who told me to “lean out of the mountain”. It worked! It really made the whole thing easier.

Trusting in a process to support your thinking is a bit like that.

One of the later “Generating Ideas” training sessions I facilitated was attended by 8 participants; all of whom were part of the global communications team; native to and based in places such as Brazil, Russia, India and Malaysia. . After having been taught the basic process roles/steps, they were to spend the rest of the day using the process to develop a real-life idea; preparing to take it onto the Selection stage.

I had used, and trained, the process many times; but this was this group’s first go and expectations (and associated risks!) were high.

In the “Generating Ideas” Guidelines, Step 1 is the same for each role; “First of all, just listen....”

Having split the group into 2 syndicates, I was moving between the two rooms to see how they were getting on. One group had decided to take a ‘short-cut’ and had jumped over the “just listen.... “ step and had gone straight to answering the questions on the “Idea Evaluation Form”. I got there too late and they were committed and determined to carry on this way.

The other group had taken time to get to know each other better and was just starting out. They took out the “Idea Evaluation Form” and then one member of the group, who had been reading the Guidelines, stopped them.

Something magical happened. They all sat back, looked at the woman whose idea was being worked on, and “just listened... “ to her thinking. They paid attention to what she was saying in such a supportive way that her thinking went way beyond the initial concept.

It was only when she had really finished, that they filled in the form. They had listened so intently that they did this from memory.

When the 2 syndicates came to feed back what they’d done; the difference between the groups was obvious.

The first group, which had started by filling in the Evaluation Form, had learned nothing new about the idea. They felt no real excitement; it was just something they had to do.

In contrast, there was real energy and passion for the idea in the second group. Through the quality of their attention, they had encouraged the idea generator to grow the idea and its potential market. In addition, they had experienced something even more valuable; the magic that listening with unconditional, positive regard can make to the way people work and think together. Their cultural differences had added value to the process rather than getting in its way.

Lessons Learned

In good-old 20:20 hindsight, it’s easy to understand the cause of the groups’ difficulties. Unlike UK-based employees, these associates only came together in this country for a few days each year and had to attend training courses as and when available during their time here.

All other employees who participated in the “Growing Ideas” role training sessions had attended the “Developing a Creative Thinking Environment” workshop within the previous 3 months. They had experienced the power of Attention; listening to, and being listened to, in a Thinking Partnership.

Although it was possible to get good results from following the “Growing Ideas” process steps; as seen in the case study, above, it is obvious that knowledge – and more particularly, experience - of the Thinking Environment, is necessary to develop ease in using the process.

On-going Benefits

We have now completed our active contribution to this part of the project. However, we continue to keep up to date with its progress.

The process **has** become part of the client’s “way we do things here” and, unusually, more ideas are being submitted year on year. After their experience of the process, it’s perhaps not so surprising that the foreign-based communications associates are contributing more ideas than anyone else!