



**Opinion: Direction and Discipline: How Leaders  
Tap the Creative Talent of their Enterprise**

by

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# Direction and Discipline: How Leaders Tap the Creative Talent of their Enterprise

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

People want to be innovative. Innovation appeals to an innate desire for building a better future. In today's dynamic enterprise, employees naturally want to develop and implement new ideas. Companies have the opportunity to capture their employees' ingenuity by teaching skills and creating an environment that promotes and optimizes innovative behavior, then building the stage to let their superstars shine.

How does a leader start the process of fostering an environment that welcomes innovation and gets the most out of the potentially boundless ideas of their employees? They do it by inspiring others about what is possible; ensuring the importance of innovation is recognized by all; and by creating what may at first sound like an impossible paradox – establishing a discipline of innovation. The company then builds an innovation platform that effectively supports this discipline and enables the enterprise to continuously improve ideas in an iterative manner, ensuring the best ideas can be selected, funded and launched to the big time.

## **2. SETTING DIRECTION: INSPIRATION AND ALIGNMENT**

Companies looking to aggressively boost their innovation capabilities need a committed leadership team with an entrepreneurial mindset. They need to be forward looking; they need to inspire the organization about what is possible. They need to set direction, clarify priorities and define the boundaries around the type of innovation required for the company to thrive. Through their articulation, leaders form a strategic sandbox where entrepreneurs throughout the enterprise are invited to play and invent the future.

Pioneering companies like Apple and Google typically have a powerful, widely shared and strongly reinforced "stretch vision" of the intended future. Leaders act in full alignment with the intended future and model the necessary innovation practices. They embrace their natural optimism and become an appreciative audience for creative ideas, ask inspiring questions, encourage collaboration, free up resources, and clear paths through the bureaucracy. These behaviors are especially important for novel ideas that are harder to conceive and easier to kill.

There is no innovation without leadership.

## **3. BUILDING A DISCIPLINE: SKILLS, TOOLS, AND SCALE**

In a turbulent marketplace, when more complexity can add even more confusion, it is important to have a simple and straightforward innovation system (e.g., explore opportunities, generate breakthrough ideas, optimize value, select the best, and mobilize for results). Shared and easy-to-use innovation tools and practices can enable everyone in a company to work together, across boundaries, to develop ideas that deliver compelling customer value. Most companies agree this is not a time to rely on lone genius to carry the day. Yet few companies have developed a shared set of common language, concepts, and innovation practices that can enable them to collectively supercharge their efforts to grow their business, reduce costs, or outperform the competition.

### 3.1 Skills: Establishing Innovation Essentials

If you are looking for ordinary people to come up with extraordinary ideas, they should be well versed in the fundamentals of innovation. You would not dream of mobilizing an army without running the troops through boot camp. Yet we send unarmed innovators into a battle for funding and management attention all the time. Everyone being asked to contribute his or her energy and imagination to assist the organization in its mission should be able to:

- Identify significant innovation opportunities,
- Generate creative solutions,
- Develop value propositions,
- Communicate ideas in a clear and compelling manner,
- Create cost effective prototypes of their ideas, and
- Collaborate effectively with colleagues to rapidly improve ideas.

Most employees possess some of these skills to some degree, but imagine the innovation potential if everyone in your enterprise was proficient at all of them. Not only would each person and his or her idea have a greater chance of success, but collectively whole new levels of teamwork would be unleashed through interactions with competent collaborators, mentors, and sponsors.

### 3.2 Tools: One of the Critical Few

Too often the processes organizations use to pursue innovation can actually erode their capability to innovate. Systems built on stages and reviews can bureaucratize the process, limit the potential for breakthrough innovation, and deflect attention from the user-experience. Then, by limiting responsibility for innovation to a specific department, these organizations actually underutilize the creative capabilities of other employees.

One tool that cuts through the bureaucracy and enables employees at all levels to develop their innovative ideas is CO-STAR. By answering six basic, yet essential questions, CO-STAR can turn an inexact concept into a well-honed value proposition, thereby enabling employees not proficient in core innovation skills to work through these with the help of the model.

CO-STAR stands for: Customer – Opportunity – Solution – Team – Advantage – Results. These are the six elements that are central to the CO-STAR framework for crystallizing the thinking behind an idea. It is a vehicle for enhancing innovative ideas through constructive dialogue and a process for focusing attention on the fundamentals that make an idea valuable.

- Who are the intended Customers and what are their unmet needs?
- What is the full potential of the Opportunity?
- What is your proposed Solution for capturing the opportunity and satisfying a customer?
- Who needs to be on the Team to ensure the solution's success?
- What is your competitive Advantage over the alternatives?
- What Results will be achieved from your solution?

There are always many more ideas than those that can provide important value. Every element of the CO-STAR value proposition is essential for an idea "to grow up" to deliver value. The continued insight and passion of an innovation champion and team is necessary to turn an initial idea into a value proposition worthy of investment. Value propositions then become the new currency of innovation, not simply the raw ideas. Venture capitalists have been using methods like this for years to reduce risk and maximize returns on their investments.

### **3.3 Scale: Tapping the Genius of the Entire Enterprise**

Social media and crowdsourcing have introduced a new era of collective brilliance. The latest technologies break down traditional silos and allow for open innovation with large numbers of employees, as well as with suppliers, alliance partners, or even customers.

Pioneering companies are employing Web 2.0 software to harness the genius of the group far beyond teams that meet in the same place or the same time. For example, a web-based application, "Q+ Innovation Management," enables innovators to share their ideas utilizing the CO-STAR framework online and to gather feedback from any group anywhere in the world. In addition, companies can run targeted innovation campaigns — issuing invitations to innovate within a specific area of importance (e.g. revenue growth, cost savings, operational efficiency, or product breakthroughs), with a two to three week window of time for collecting hundreds of ideas from employees. Participants submit ideas online, as well as provide feedback and vote for the ideas of others. "The wisdom of the crowd" drives the highest ranked value propositions to the top, along with comments or links to additional information and resources for each one. A real-time dashboard makes it clear how ideas, activities, and decisions are progressing through the pipeline.

Just as a good surgeon, engineer or artist would insist on using the right equipment to get the best results, leaders now have powerful online innovation tools to support their disciplined practices. There is no longer any reason for companies not to scale their innovation activities to match the size of the problems they are tackling or the opportunities they are chasing.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

All organizations are perfectly designed to produce the innovations they produce. Highly innovative organizations are specifically designed and directed by their leaders to be capable of delivering increasingly better results both from continuous improvements and from major breakthroughs that create new markets. When passionate, skilled innovators are supported by committed leaders and shared discipline, the result is a healthy pipeline of bold, strong value propositions and a highly engaged workforce capable of inventing the future.

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