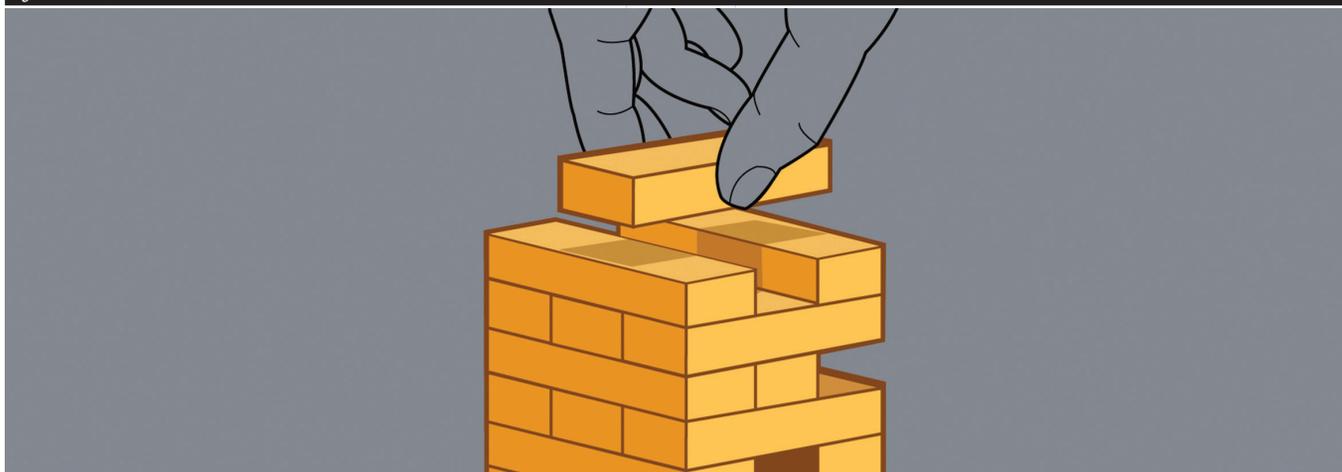


HOW TO HELP YOUR PEOPLE BRING GREAT IDEAS TO LIFE

By Mohd Hanif Ismail



For some, innovation can be the only way out of a crisis, or perhaps the response to a changing environment – basically whenever ‘business as usual’ no longer works. For others, it can be motivated not by a crisis or other external factors, but by the positive desire to reach higher or do better. The motivations differ from company to company, and as a leader, it is important to consider what you want to get out of the pursuit of innovation. SME Magazine speaks to Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg, co-author of “Innovation as Usual: How to Help Your People Bring Great Ideas to Life” to get his views on encouraging companies to be more innovative, as well as the importance of innovative employees.

FIRST, HOW DO YOU DEFINE INNOVATION?

We define innovation as “creating results by doing new things”. Two things are important in this definition. First, it is about creating results of some kind; if it doesn’t have impact, it is not innovation. Second, you create this by doing something new. Business as usual – meaning, creating results by doing old, well-known things – is great as long as it works. But innovation means that your employees (or your customers) need to change their behaviour – and that’s where the real challenge resides. Innovation is not about thinking differently – it is about acting differently.

BEING INNOVATIVE CAN ALSO BE EQUATED TO TAKING RISK. WHAT ARE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENCOURAGE COMPANIES TO BE MORE INNOVATIVE?

First, a central point: companies hate risk because risk is bad. Taking on more risk is not something you should do unthinkingly. Instead of trying to increase the risk tolerance of a company, the point is often to reduce the risk associated with testing new ideas. Good innovators find clever ways of testing their ideas, so they de-risk them before they start putting real money on the table.

Second, in practice, there are different types of risk, depending on where you try to innovate. We tell managers to define what kind of failure is acceptable – what can we afford to lose? Which areas are okay to play with, and which aren’t? You don’t want people getting creative in the ethics department, because that can have serious consequences

– but you can perhaps encourage them to experiment with, say, the way you run meetings, because if that goes wrong, the damage to the company is rather limited.

Finally, you need to look at individuals. Innovation can be seen as a higher-risk, higher-reward career path; it is okay if not everybody chooses that path, as long as some people do. To master innovation, you need to develop a nuanced understanding of your strategic environment and the kinds of risk you can or cannot run.

YOU HAVE TRAVELLED ALL OVER THE WORLD. IN YOUR OPINION, DO CULTURAL FACTORS PLAY A PART IN ENCOURAGING INNOVATION?

Cultural factors matter to innovation, just as they do in most other aspects of business. For that reason, it is critical that the drive for innovation is led by someone who understands the local context – not just in terms of the country, but also with regards to the company’s culture and history, which can be equally or more important than the national culture. This is doubly important when you look at the challenges of what we call stealthstorming: to navigate the political landscape inside the organization successfully, you first have to understand it – or enlist the help of someone who does.

At the most basic level, however, innovators behave very similarly once you look underneath the veil of cultural differences. The frameworks we described in the book distils the six critical behaviours that you have to foster – focus, connect, tweak, select, stealthstorm and persist – and those are recurring across all the cultures we have worked in as we did our research.

INNOVATIVE LEADERS VERSUS INNOVATIVE FOLLOWERS. WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT?

Innovative followers – if by followers you mean employees. One of the core ideas is that leaders should NOT necessarily be innovators themselves. Instead, they should step into a specific role we call the ‘Innovation Architect’, meaning a leader who creates a space where the employees can be more creative as part of their regular jobs. Leading innovation is not about cultivating your own personal brilliance. The core job of a leader is to create great results through other people – and that goes for innovation as well.

SME