

Innovation...

Is it top down or bottom up?

The reality is it's both but most of the time it depends on your business, how big you are and how you've structured it!

For those that are unclear, top down innovation is normally the domain of the small business owner or entrepreneur. Someone with a great idea who leads a small team to help him/her implement it. The creative drive, push and new idea generation comes very much from this person, they are the innovator and they drive from the top down.


The problem comes when small businesses grow into medium businesses and then large businesses and the focus from the original innovator at the top naturally reduces. Unless a strategic approach to a company-wide innovative culture is implemented once the growth of that organisation has begun it becomes very difficult to continually drive top down innovation over large tiered and structured teams. A natural side effect of most companies expansion.

It's at this point when an organisation needs bottom up innovation, creativity, ideas, problem solving, entrepreneurial vision and risk taking from the proverbial 'man on the shop floor' to the senior management team. Innovation is everyone's job and every organisation is full of people with interesting ideas, creative thinkers and problem solvers with entrepreneurial spirit but they need the right culture in order to thrive.

The role of the management team is to act as the top down innovators, to pull ideas and innovation upward through their organisation by providing the right environment and empowering people to value their ideas and feel confident enough to share them.

So, top down innovation never actually stops or should I say the perception of top down innovation never stops. Leaders have to show their teams that they practice what they preach, that their ideas will be taken seriously and that there is a process for evaluating ideas and then commercialising the valuable ones.





There have been some great examples of leaders over recent years who have managed to create top down and bottom up cultures to great effect. The best known is probably former GE chairman Jack Welch whose approach to leadership and innovation created one of the most valuable companies on the planet.

In a recent interview on Americas CNBC Jack confirmed his view and one that I share that Innovation is about culture...

"Everyone thinks someone's going to go off and stick a finger in a light bulb and have an idea, and have a magic Bill Gates, Sergey Brin. Innovation isn't like that. Innovation has got to be in the blood of every employee and every company. Finding a better way every day has to be a culture that CEOs drive, business leaders' drive... That's what innovation is. It's a bubbling up of thousands and thousands of people."

Jack Welch

I work with companies helping them implement the right structure and approach to the organisational culture required to increase the capacity for innovation because the reality is whether top down or bottom up great ideas and breakthrough innovations can come from anywhere in an organisation. However they will only see the light of day with the full backing of the leaders at the top.

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