



REFRAMING INNOVATION – MAKING IT SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

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Innovation is a tricky topic; it both excites and intimidates. Some people are thrilled by the challenge whereas others fear it, believing that invention or creativity is beyond them.

Then there is a third group – the majority - who don't work in innovation hubs or R&D labs but go about their work, and sometimes see ways that their job could be made easier, more efficient or done in better service of their customers. This article is written to support this third group to help them get the opportunity to contribute to improvement and innovation in their work. The question addressed is how can coaching support leaders as they seek to engage their team in this type of innovation? This will be explored in two parts, with the first covered in this article:

- Creating an innovation mindset
- Creating an innovation environment

PART 1: CREATING AN INNOVATION MINDSET

If you are one of the millions of people who have spoken to your boss about an idea but been told 'we've tried that before and it didn't work' or 'that's a nice idea but we don't need to change things at the moment' then you have experienced one of the most common blocks to innovation – a mindset resistant to change and the risks that go with it, fixed on the notion that everything is working fine and 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'.

Despite these commonly held views, there is plenty of evidence that we need to be more innovative in the way we approach work. Brené Brown, in the research for her book 'Dare to Lead', lists 10 behaviours and cultural issues that senior leaders believe hinder organisational success. Two of these are relevant here:

- Not enough leaders are taking smart risks or creating and sharing bold ideas to meet changing demands and the insatiable need for innovation.
- Perfectionism and fear are keeping people from learning and growing.

NORMALISING VULNERABILITY

Brown argues that all of us will feel insecure when we seek to innovate because vulnerability is about 'having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome'. She therefore describes vulnerability as 'the birthplace of innovation creativity and change' and coaches have an important role to play in both challenging and supporting leaders as they take their first steps into the unknown.

To encourage a greater sense of risk-taking and growth Brown argues that organisations have to tolerate a greater degree of failure and encourage individuals to act with courage. A coach can play an important role by opening a dialogue to help their coachee explore their feelings about innovation. They may be stuck with their private fears: the fear of exploring unknown ideas and futures, the fear of meaningfully connecting with other people to garner ideas and the fear that their efforts to innovate will go awry. These fears are natural and common and so starting a discussion about a leaders' resistance and where this comes from, can begin a process where that leader is able to express their uncertainties and perhaps acknowledge that they don't have all the answers. From this point of acceptance, they may feel freer to move forward.

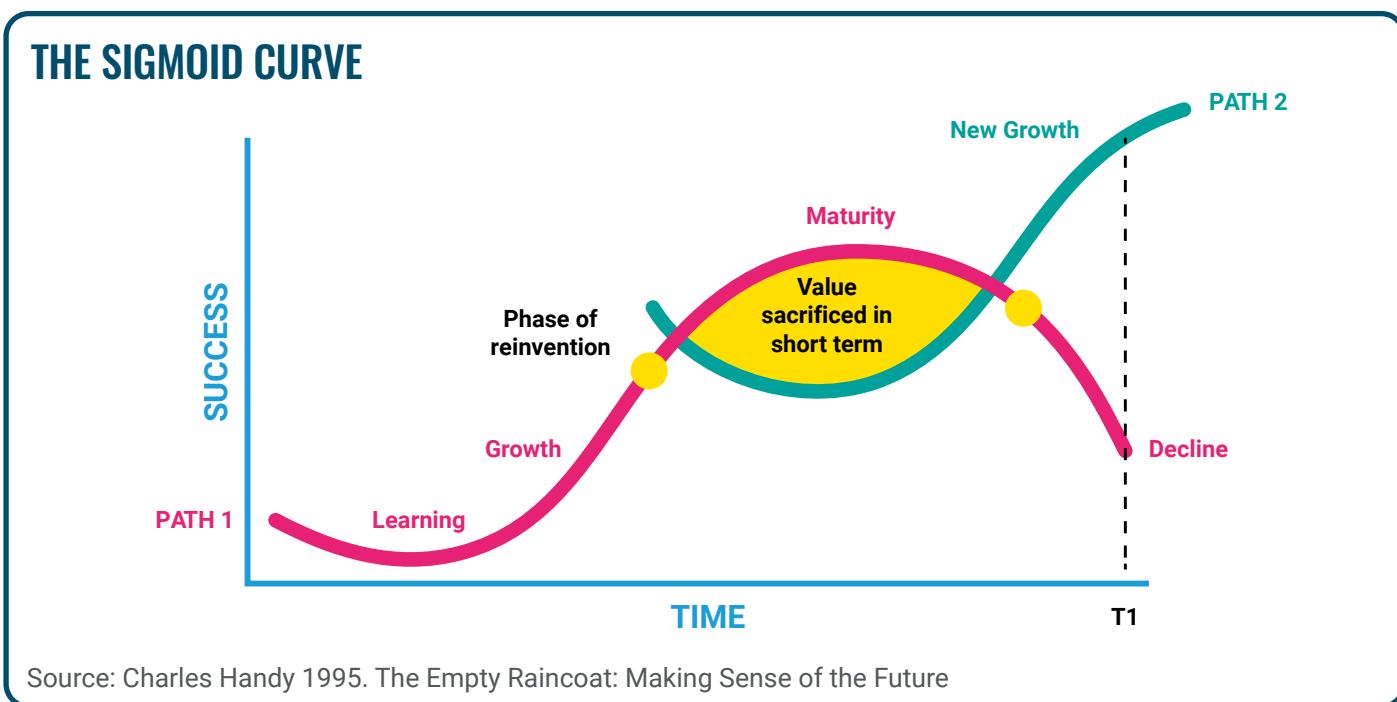
One of the most widespread fears experienced by leaders is that they will lose control if they invite feedback and seek ideas from their team. Other leaders may simply not know how to set-up a process where there is open discussion of the possibilities that change could create. Coaching can therefore be a time to explore a coachees' openness to new thinking and to work out a plan for starting a feedback and change process.

Having advocated that organisations should encourage their leaders to have courage and take some risks it would be reckless not to recognise that this places a burden on those who are not used to working in this way. Brené Brown talks about taking 'smart' risks and this involves judgement about how to make this transition. Here a coach can provide a valuable sounding board when working out when and how to do things differently.

MOVING SUCCESSFULLY BEYOND MATURITY

Some leaders may be resistant to innovation for good reason; the product or service they manage is performing well. A successful leader can be difficult to challenge – but I believe Charles Handy's thinking about the sigmoid curve can be introduced by a coach to help avoid complacency and promote innovation.

The sigmoid curve tells the story of life itself, of growth, maturity, and decline. The period of maturity marks the time of peak success, and most leaders naturally want to enjoy the fruits of this period. But the risk is they wait too long to re-invent and are only alert to the need for change once decline has set in. But decline is difficult to reverse, and the leader's reputation may have been dented and energy may be flagging. Handy argues that the best time to begin re-invention is when performance is still on the up, even if it has not reached full maturity.



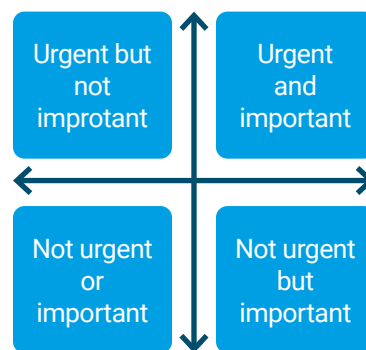
I once worked closely with a successful FMCG organisation and one of their leaders impressed on me the importance of responding to 'weak signals' in his information environment. His thesis was that if you wait for strong signals that indicate change is needed it will often be too late to alter course or the signals will be visible to your competitors, who may have already made the first response.

The phase of re-invention will likely be informed by weak signals that PATH 1 is about to mature whereas the strong signals will indicate that there is more growth to come. A coach can support coachees through the ambiguous and difficult process of assessing the need to change by helping them to anticipate the risks of delay and decline and consider these alongside the risks of beginning something new.

Handy's thinking has been presented as it applies to the external world of product or process innovation. The sigmoid curve can be equally applied to the leaders' internal world of personal ambition and career aspirations. Is the coachee approaching maturity in their current role? Is there a need for them to choose a new career path? These are important coaching questions.

PRIORITISING INNOVATION

Another challenge that coaching can provide is to review a coachees' priorities. If the coachee feels they don't have the time for innovation, it may be worth looking at whether their priorities are driven just by urgency rather than a combination of what is urgent and really important?



We all like to clear our way through urgent tasks first, but if we keep ignoring important priorities such as soliciting feedback, generating new ideas and collecting better market intelligence then we may find our product, service or process has become obsolete or is in decline.

A consequence of a leader setting innovation as a priority is that this has the power to change the dynamic in a team. Team members' own mindsets will shift from one of 'maintenance' to one of 'improvement' and the ideas can start to flow.

IN SUMMARY

This article has set out some of the ways in which coaches can contribute to a shift to an innovation mindset through the classic mix of challenge and support:

- challenge established, risk averse mindsets and ways of doing things
- normalise a sense of vulnerability and free leaders to work with uncertainty and be resilient to moments of failure
- provide a sounding board to help leaders with the fine judgements of when and how they want to take risks and initiate change
- introduce the sigmoid curve and highlight the risks of decline in a leaders internal and external world and set these alongside the risks of change
- reflect on a coachees' priorities and where innovation sits among these.

...Look out for part 2 coming soon!

Contact Graham Clark to find out how we can support you with Custom Coaching and Team Coaching: graham.clark@theocm.co.uk.