



REFRAMING INNOVATION – MAKING IT SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE PART 2

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This is the second of two articles about the ways that coaching can support Innovation. The first article presented some ideas for helping to shift established mindsets that resist innovation and change. This second article assumes a leader is ready to improve or reinvent the product or service that they manage, and now wants to create an environment, particularly in their team, that encourages the flow of new ideas.

CREATING AN INNOVATION ENVIRONMENT

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety underpins an innovation environment because it is the belief among team members that they won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with questions, concerns, and ideas. Bréne Brown succinctly describes the sterile environment that takes hold when safety is missing:

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When teams are afraid of being put down or ridiculed for trying something and failing, or even putting forward a radical new idea, the best you can expect is status quo and group think.

”

- Bréne Brown, *Dare to Lead*

A powerful sense of psychological safety builds the confidence of a team and creates trust – trust that the team culture will not be dominated by blame, that weaknesses can be shared and managed, and that a degree of risk-taking will be tolerated. For leaders this raises some important coaching questions:

- Are brave attempts celebrated, whatever the outcome?
- Is the team aiming to be the best or to just avoid mistakes?
- What happens when things do go wrong?
- Is there a spirit of collaboration and mutual accountability for standards?
- Is the leader a role model for building trusting relationships?

Even in situations where ideas for innovation come solely from leaders, questions from team members should be encouraged because open dialogue helps to create the understanding, 'buy-in' and motivation necessary for ideas to succeed in practice.

A key element of building psychological safety is for leaders to close the feedback loop after the team has offered their ideas. If these ideas just disappear without a response, this indicates a lack of respect which drains energy and deters future engagement. Coaches therefore can bring the importance of closing the feedback loop into their discussions.

Diversity

Diversity is another foundational element of creative thinking in teams. This is simply because 'sameness' limits the breadth of ideas that come forward.



Diversity drives innovation. When we limit who can contribute, we in turn limit what problems we can solve.

- Telle Whitney, Computer Scientist and Entrepreneur



Coaching is a valuable way to explore the difficulty that some leaders experience when trying to tackle challenges with more diverse input. Some leaders may want to alter patterns of behaviour and overcome biases that they have built up over time. These may have served them in the past but not be relevant now. Some themes to explore in coaching could be:

- How have you thought about and brought about innovation previously? Is this approach still going to work? Is anything missing from your past approach?
- Have you consulted all the stakeholders that have a perspective relevant to the changes that might be made? Are you aware of who these stakeholders might be, or do you have blind spots?
- Are all ideas treated as equal, before they are properly evaluated?

Some tactical questions may also need to be addressed to encourage more diverse input:

- Who speaks first and who is silent in meetings? What are the reasons for this?
- What steps can be taken to bring more people into a conversation about innovation?

Once a plan for change has been developed and new ideas move into an implementation phase it is common for a focused action team to take over. This can be important to operate at pace, but it is sensible to ask whether periodic check-ins with a more diverse group of stakeholders may help to monitor whether the original innovation goals are still being met.

Enriching Your Information Environment

New ideas come through meaningful connections and relationships, within and beyond the team. A coach can help a coachee to audit their range of relationships – where are they strong, where are they weak? Where does their information and market intelligence come from? Are they well connected with suppliers and customers? Are they receiving data and insight from different sources across their market? Have they a way of learning from competitors?

Given that valuable market information can sometimes be hard to gather a coach can also explore whether the leader has data and perspectives of their own that can be offered to others in exchange for their insights. Building a spirit of reciprocity can be the key that unlocks access to better quality and more wide-ranging intelligence.

It can also be important for a coach to ask whether any data exists on the team culture and the foundational elements of psychological safety and diversity. If not, would a 360 or 180 feedback process help? And how can a leader make best use of this type of information?

Another important source of ideas is the customer base. Is the leader involved in the sales process or customer review meetings, hearing first hand from customers about their experiences and emerging requirements? If not, can they get involved?

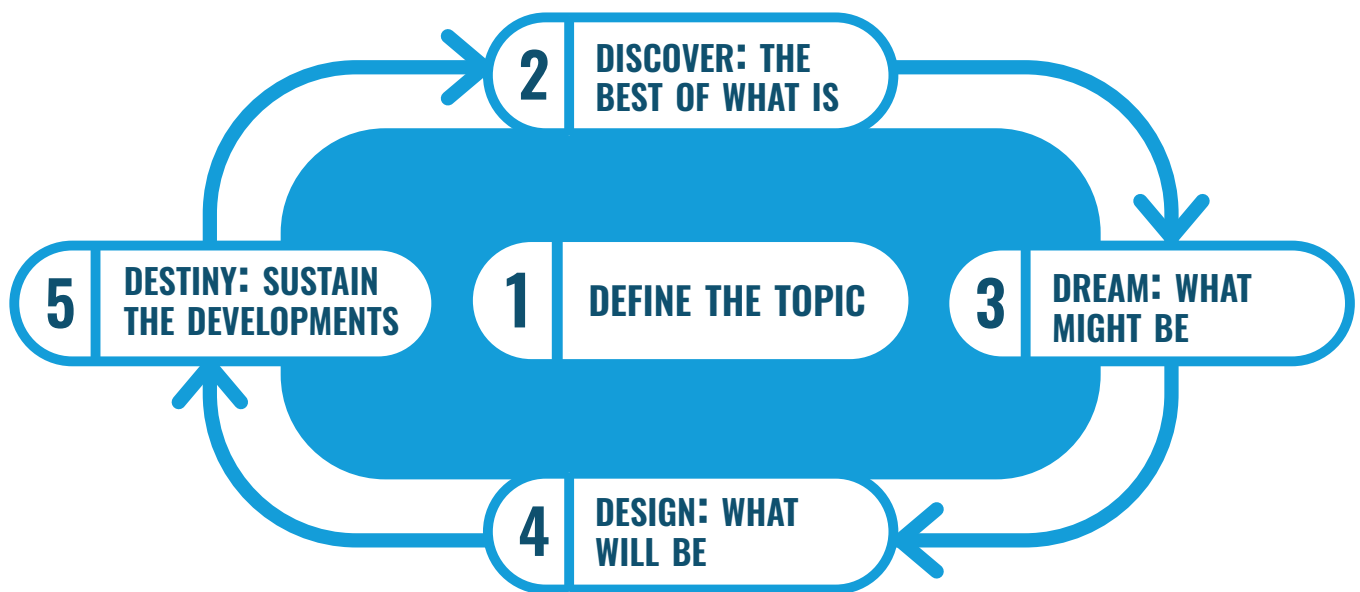
Let Ideas Breathe

Jeet Chopra in his book, 'Managing the People Side of Innovation' says that the first rule of innovation is to 'grow ideas, not mow them down'. Too many ideas are cut down, too soon; rejected on instincts that are engrained by current practices. He says that many ideas may not seem useful at first, but if they are nurtured, they may transform into something valuable.

The question then becomes, which ideas to nurture? The answer is that most ideas need to be considered for a little time, with the opportunity to build out the potential benefits. A better assessment can then be made of whether an idea is worth taking further, reducing the chance of missing an idea with potential.

This may sound idealistic, but a coach can ask, whether, with some planning, it is possible to set-up a process where ideas are given the chance to breathe and are reviewed by a diverse audience, without being instantly rejected. Instincts can sometimes be an unreliable guide if the business environment is changing.

A methodology that can help grow ideas is appreciative enquiry - a positive and systematic approach to generating ideas and turning them into action. It is suitable for work that is focused on improvement, as opposed to blue sky innovation, because it acknowledges what is good about the current state and moves forward from here.



A coach can become an active role model for the process of appreciative inquiry when they establish the coaching contract. They can use the 5-D cycle to set coaching goals and explain how this methodology can also be used by teams to improve services, processes, and products.

Re-thinking the Value of your Product or Service

Guy Kawasaki (ex. Apple, venture capitalist) in his TED lecture, 'The Art of Innovation' sets out his recommendations for innovation. The first of these is to 'make meaning', in other words to reveal the over-arching purpose of a product, service or process. He asks - is a computer designed to run spreadsheets or is it producing data to support business decisions, or is there a purpose still higher - to democratise information management?

Making meaning or revealing value is not just an exercise in self-aggrandisement, it helps get to the core of business purpose. Defining business purpose simply in terms of what happens now is limiting - this current reality restricts thinking about how value can be delivered in completely different ways.

The coaching space is one where clients can step back from day-to-day activities and really think through the value they provide to customers. They can brainstorm the 'dream' phase of appreciative enquiry to envision what might be better and simply 'wonder if' things could be done differently. Playing the 'wonder if' game sets a low threshold for the practicality of ideas, which is necessary at the start of the innovation process – it helps get our thinking unstuck – it allows ideas to emerge and grow.

In summary

This article has set out a series of topics that can be the focus of coaching discussions that aim to support a leader as they build an innovation environment within their team.

- Are the foundations of psychological safety and diversity in place and is the leader a role model for good practice in these aspects of the team culture? When ideas come forward from the team is there feedback on how these are being used?
- Is the leaders' and the teams' information network comprehensive? What new sources of data, information and insight would have value? Would a reciprocal exchange of information with stakeholders and competitors open-up better dialogue and reveal deeper, more valuable insights?
- Does the leader have regular contact and open conversations with customers to understand their points of view?
- Are ideas given a chance to breathe, with a diverse audience given the opportunity to review them and see if they have value?
- Can the coach role model the use of appreciative enquiry as the coaching contract is established?
- Does the leader fully understand what value customers derive from their products and services and can they articulate their over-arching business purpose? Are there completely new ways to deliver the value that customers seek?

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