

How to be an Innovations Manager

These are some of the notes that I've left for a successor. They're about the spirit rather than the detail of the job (I've left that part out to protect the guilty/innocent), but I'm hoping they'll be useful beyond their original organisational boundaries.

First Advice

To do this job, you need the mind of Edison, the spirit of a streetfighter and the thick hide of a battleaxe. It gets messy sometimes, but always remember that it's not personal (usually): you're asking people to change the way that they work and think, and that tends to kick in defence systems (the "corporate immune system"). Or as my colleague used to say whilst giggling manically "the technology is difficult, but the politics is impossible" (before going back in to sort out the politics).

Your boss might be a long way away. Listen hard to them, but always have a plan in place for what you're doing over the next few months and how you're going to respond to unanticipated events (a new idea, a new request, a change of strategy). They are also not your only boss: their bosses are also keen to keep innovations alive (or they wouldn't keep signing the cheques) and may often drop by with ideas about the group's direction and useful things it can do. Listen hard to them too – they've got where they are for several very good reasons – but make sure you tell your boss what's going on if you suddenly seem to change direction on him/her.

What the Job is (and isn't)

A large part of this job is to work very hard in lots of different areas at once, handling technical and business aspects of ideas, doing heavy-duty politics where necessary to keep them alive, and *at the same time* making sure that enough other people in the right places take ownership – i.e. believe that it's their idea and their work that has got it to the stage that it's at. This is not a job for egotists: if you want the big prizes then stay away, but if you want quiet respect from people all over the organisation and the satisfaction of seeing things happen, and you've got the skills to do that, then it's probably for you.

You need to understand business. You don't need to have this understanding right away, but you need to be able to have that gut feel about whether an idea is worth pushing forward or not; how it fits into the organisation, what the competition landscape is, whether the team behind it can be trained to (or is already able to) succeed. This could come from years of experience (unsolicited bid work helps lots here), but mostly it's applied common sense: much of it can be gleaned from a combination of training courses, reading the background notes on things like Dragons Den and The Apprentice, watching and learning from the people in the organisation who are really good at it and lots and lots of practice (sponsoring Business Challenges and reading the feedback that its teams get from the business gurus is good for this).

You need to understand the business. What does the organisation do – what do connected

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~~organisations do that could help it (or that you could post not us but still connected ideas to).~~

~~You also need to be able to do business, which is not quite the same as understanding how it works. Mostly this is about people, and part of your role is to protect each ideas team whilst they learn enough to do this themselves.~~

~~You need to understand and like people. Much of the time you're supporting people whilst they learn and develop. You need to gain their trust; done right, you will also over time earn their respect. You need to understand how to spot different personalities: their needs, drivers, the things they worry about, the things that scare them, and know when to manage them closely and when to let them fly. And you need to make them feel safe: remember that the deal is that they get the plaudits for their work, and you take the hit if it goes wrong (aka "if it goes right it's the team's success, if it goes wrong it's an innovations experiment"). This isn't to say that you should paint 'doormat' on your head and let people take advantage of you, but a little support in the right way can have some wonderful personal development and business results.~~

~~And being a natural systems engineer helps. Lots. Although again much of this can be learnt through patience, training and experience.~~