

Innovation Skills That Can Grow Your Company

By Mark Faust (Excerpt from Growth or Bust!)

Choose a few areas of your company that you'd most like to improve, like sales and profitability per deal, and use these innovation skills to accelerate growth.

Respectfully Challenging the Status Quo

Continually encourage your team to ask *Why*, *Why not*, and *What if* of many of the givens within your business. Great innovations come from someone asking a great question. I have seen some companies benefit by actually having a list of these questions that they will pull out when dealing with their top objectives, challenges, and constraints. Some good questions are:

- Why can't we do it this way?
- What would happen if...?
- Are there other industries or businesses that might have faced this same problem? How could we learn from them?

Flipping

Taking a position or issue and flipping it (or your conversation or consideration about it) to the opposite view is a common technique innovators use to change paradigms and discover new solutions. Playing devil's advocate or flipping an issue to the opposite possibility tends to create a synthesis and thus a new idea. If you were to have sales or marketing people regularly attempt to persuade you or others as to why a customer should buy from the competition, odds are you will all learn something, and perhaps innovate a new marketing or sales approach.

Embracing Constraints

Great questions create nonexistent constraints. For example, ask your team questions like, "If we weren't currently carrying this product or selling to this market or conducting business in this manner, would we even consider beginning to?" Or, "If we were legally prevented from selling to any of our existing customers, how would you make money next year?" A false constraint such as this challenges one's mind to think of alternatives that it otherwise would not, and is an excellent exercise to facilitate with a sales team to help them innovate ways to sell to more non-customers.

Studying Customers Like a Scientist

A common Japanese saying used in many businesses is *genchi genbutsu*, which means, "going to the spot and seeing for yourself." The concept is to go to your customers as they are using your product or service and actually watching and intently studying them and their situation.

Experimenting

Perhaps you are already familiar with test marketing and the "A/B Testing" of alternate advertising campaigns to continuously improve your customer acquisition, but how much more experimentation could you do? When leaders talk about wanting to encourage their team members to be unafraid of failure and to learn from their mistakes, they expect their team members to engage in calculated risk-taking and continual experimentation to improve

processes.

You should encourage your team to test and experiment more often for improvements they could implement. Consider holding lunch-and-learns where people share their experiments, lessons learned, failures, and of course successes.

Networking

In one company there hangs a sign in most every office. It reads:

“The insights required to solve many of our most challenging problems come from **outside our industry** and scientific field. We must **aggressively and proudly incorporate** into our work findings and advances which were **not invented here.**”

As a leader you must work to expel the NIH—“Not Invented Here”—syndrome and encourage your people to network widely inside and perhaps outside the industry. Some have said that changes only happen to people because of the books they’ve read and the people they’ve met. Finding places where best practices are shared, and where productive yet diverse relationships are built, will help to bring more innovation into your workplace.