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Damien Duhamel

Ten easy-to-implement rules to boost innovation from within - Part 2: To innovate, promote failure"

In this series of 10 short essays, I will provide ten easy rules for you to adopt to instill innovation at the core of your company in Singapore or the rest of Asia. These rules are bold and will surely contravene inherited teachings and convictions.

2. To Innovate, Promote Failure

How is that for a bold statement ?

No one in an executive circle wants to hear that his/her idea is "stupid" and that "it will never work". True innovation is based on trial and error and by default, failure. First we observe, we see the light and then we try. Trying is by definition no guarantee of success. There are countless examples of great innovations that came to us by "mistake": Penicillin, Coca Cola, Post-It(s), Corn Flakes, Starbucks' Frappuccino.

However , let's be honest, the immense majority of companies will not encourage, promote or even reward failure. Maybe more so in Singapore... Kiasu anyone ? Kiasu boss who is afraid to take on a risky idea. Kiasu employee afraid boss will not support his suggestion. The kiasu full-circle... To innovate, that circle needs to be broken.

There is no Innovator Business degree handed out at Harvard yet, and everyone in the company has the potential to come with a truly innovative, paradigm-changing idea. However how many employees are going to self-kill their own idea simply due to the fact that boss, peers, employees, and management will either dismiss the idea in two seconds or worse, make a joke about it? We are probably all guilty of witty sarcasm when it comes to others' ideas. Still, empirical evidence shows that some employees leave their jobs to launch their own business based on an idea born inside and killed instantly by the same corporate culture.

Encourage risk taking by discounting failure. If failure is a dirty word within your ecosystem, you will not see mind-blowing ideas from within. This is probably the most difficult mind change for any traditional executive. Embracing and celebrating uncertainty associated with the innovation process is indeed not something widely supported by stock markets and large organizations. This is where most firms fail.

However, what most firms miss out is that failures and mistakes are two different things. You need to define failure as a learning process. There are tons of fantastic learning and valuable experience derived from failed experiments. As US film director Woody Allen says: "if you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative". Mistakes are however defined in this context as inattention, poor preparation, dumbness, and/or carelessness. Mistakes are indeed failures as they do not offer much learning. They produce little if any valuable information and they need to be rightfully sanctioned. So celebrate and value the first, avoid at all costs the second.

Conclusion: "candor of expression" within your enterprise is your key to idea generation. Undisclosed environments where fear of being ridiculed and denigrated rule, will churn absolutely zero ideas. Learn to live with the fact that failure promotes innovation, if not you will simply fail to... innovate.



Pictured: Kym Illman, as featured in Singapore Business Review

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(Check out the [first easy-to-implement rule](http://bit.ly/l8vivr) here: <http://bit.ly/l8vivr>)

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