

A culture of innovation begins at the top

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Ikea's slogan is 'Never say never.' The management understand that their behavior is key to encouraging the growth of an innovative culture.

Many executives focus on the day-to-day and leave innovation on the back burner. As a result, the important is often eclipsed by the urgent.

However, as IESE's [Joaquim Vila](#) argues in a [new technical note](#), if it was properly understood that good innovation almost certainly brings results and that postponing it would reduce the possibilities of innovating in the future, greater priority would be given to innovation and executives would be more disposed to create the circumstances that make it possible.

A commitment to innovation

These days, innovation is not limited to technology or launching new products; rather, what is needed is to create an innovative culture in which everyone feels they can contribute.

The good news is that developing a solid base for innovation is not that difficult. Granted, it requires a different management approach from the typical leadership-from-on-high model that doesn't allow for delegation.

The success stories show that when things are done well, people get involved, with the result that R+D+i becomes everyone+i.

Any innovation means introducing changes in the way things are done in order for new ideas to be transformed into results. Management, for example, can promote a culture that favors

innovation by changing the style of leadership and preparing those who work for the company.

In essence, this means establishing what everyone has to offer in terms of creativity and innovation.

A source of inspiration

What drives executives to innovate? What do the leaders of highly innovative companies have in common?

In many cases they are pursuing a dream. If this challenge is tangible and sufficiently attractive, employees will also become interested. Chasing a dream can often be a more powerful driver than extrinsic motivations such as pay. And when executives are passionate about innovation and their company's mission, their energy and the clarity of their ideas are contagious.

For example, in the 1950s, Masaru Ibuka, one of the founders of Sony, was so determined to create a new form of recording device that he motivated his engineers to work to their utmost. Some time later, this led to successful product launches such as the Walkman.

Another aspect that leaders of highly innovative companies have in common is that they share values that encourage experimentation and learning.

One example is Apple, currently one of the world's most innovative companies. It has had its failures, such as the PDA Newton or Apple TV, but, as in any innovative culture, well-intentioned errors are tolerated and later developments show that Apple learned from its mistakes.

The value of an open mind

Executives in innovative companies also tend to be open-minded and are willing to explore proactively different ways of moving forward.

Starbucks tells its staff that when a client complains, it's important that you recognize that this is an opportunity to form a close relationship.

Once the employees see that the management cares about the client's opinion, they are more likely to value it as well.

Crucially, these values, principles and practices are not exclusive to any particular sector or geographical area.

At Metalquimia, a Catalonian company that makes machinery for processing meat products, its managing director is committed to innovation within the company. All members of staff are trained in creative techniques, and the company has introduced a computer system based around the management of creativity and innovation that encourages everyone to contribute.

Keeping the faith

The top executives in innovative companies tend to be highly determined, and continue to support initiatives even when the initial results are disappointing.

Carlos Sumarroca, for example, refused to abandon his technical and scientific team despite coming under concerted pressure to do so for almost two years. As a result, his company, Agromillora, is now a world leader in tree production.

In the most innovative companies, the expression "It's not possible" is replaced by "We don't know how to do it."

Ikea's slogan ("Never say never") sums up this positive obstinacy, perseverance and determination to meet challenges and not be defeated. This persistence, of course, doesn't extend beyond the limits and principles that make the business viable.

Shared trust

In the most innovative companies, the senior executives are not just self-confident; they also have confidence in the entrepreneurial spirit of their employees.

For example, for many years at 3M, and more recently at Google, the entrepreneurial spirit has been developed and backed by a principle of freedom, as opposed to just work, in the pursuit of groundbreaking ideas. Researchers are allowed to spend some of their time on projects of their own choosing without interference from above.

Innovation should be understood as a long journey through growing achievements based on work and diligence. It must have a clear objective, but there must also be freedom to experiment.

As Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, put it, "It's a marathon. It's not a sprint. You have to have a plan and you have to stick to it. Sometimes you have to modify, but every day you have to get up and play hard."

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