

Ideas-led growth for the Knowledge Economy

By Anuradha Goyal

A good idea, the livewire that sets a live organization apace, can spring from anywhere, at anytime. This holds good mainly for the knowledge economy, where people are the key assets.

Each member, with a set of experiences, has a vision for himself or herself, and for the respective business environment. Most people have a point of view on the business areas that their work touches. Interestingly, some of the ideas they have, may produce better ways for running business with more productivity, efficiency or speed.

In the process, some powerful ideas are generated that have the potential to give organizations a new paradigm, a new dimension or a new direction. A few of these ideas may also define the next generation of growth engines for the enterprise.

Ideas, lying latent with the teams, need to be surfaced and nurtured. However, often, the organization is lost in running operations and meeting the defined targets. Thanks to paucity of time, mining these ideas is sidelined. Also, there are no formal structured ways of mining out the ideas from the large teams, which are usually scattered across geographies.

Challenges are galore, when organizations invite ideas from the teams. The biggest one being, filtering out the relevant ones from a sea of ideas. An even bigger question is, how to figure out the actual viability of such ideas? It is a mite simpler for anyone to come up with an idea on how to do business and suggest the new areas that should be ventured into. But, how should it be backed up with a valid business case? How is it ensured that there is an untapped business opportunity hidden inside the idea, not just an idea that crossed some minds without any due diligence done for the practicality of the same? Whether the idea is in line with the business that the company intends to do? Does the idea capitalize on the organization's current and scaleable capabilities?

The real challenge lies in how to productively unleash this pool of ideas lying within the organization. Organizations need to institutionalize the process of idea management in such a way that good and relevant ideas can be taken forward. The process defined should balance the double edged objectives: that while it should encourage people to come out with their ideas, irrespective of where they are in the organization structure, at the same time, it should ensure that there are filter mechanisms in place to ensure that the ideas that are taken forward and invested into are relevant for the organization.

***“Who in your organization do you believe is responsible for fundamental shifts in strategy?
There is only one right answer, and that is ‘Everybody’.” - Gary Hamel on Entrepreneurship***

Innovation management thus should be treated as a strategic initiative with strong support from the senior management. In the absence of right sponsorship, like most corporate initiatives, it is an uphill task to run a successful initiative. Senior managers should include this initiative in all their communications to the larger teams to re-enforce their commitment. It is important that the management at all levels encourages and guides people to come out and contribute their ideas. At such times, with lack of appreciation from their immediate managers, not many would be forthcoming to participate in this initiative.

Rewarding and recognizing the people or teams that participate indeed yields better results. People whose ideas are being taken forward, if given due recognition, not only provide visibility to the contributors, but also encourage the rest of the teams to contribute effectively. Incentive can also be given by letting people to take the lead or be a part of taking their ideas forward, while providing them with the organizational backbone support. At a higher level of process maturity, these initiatives can be linked to the performance management systems.

The heart of any idea management system is the process to filter out the right ideas. It is advisable that the boundaries of the ideas invited are clearly defined along with the kind of potential the ideas are expected to exhibit. This ensures that the right quality of ideas hit the basket and you have lesser number of ideas to explore in detail and also, that there are no heart burns as far as the contributors are concerned. There should be clearly defined criterions of evaluation, and if possible keep them as objective as possible. To the ideas that get filtered out at various stages, there should be a feedback on why it is not being taken forward. The crux of this process is that you need to ensure that the good ideas are not lost in the process at any stage.

While the process or initiative is going on, there are various enabling activities that can be done to help teams present their ideas with its due diligence done. These can be in form of workshops to help them write business case, providing them with mentors to give a business orientation to the ideas or simply providing them access to available research in their proposed area.

There are many intangible benefits that the organization can gain from these initiatives apart from the intended outcomes. Some of them are:

- High potential and Strategic Thinkers bubble out from teams
- Improved motivation levels as everyone gets a platform to contribute to the growth of their company
- Teams get acquainted with the constraints and challenges that the management faces when they put themselves into those shoes

To sum it all - for any organization looking for constant innovations and new ideas to keep itself on a growth path constantly, it is imperative to have an effective Idea Management Initiative that encourages its own people to think strategically and helps the organization charter new growth paths. If managed properly as part of the organizational strategy, these initiatives can help both the organization and the employees in creating an exciting work environment.