

Innovate! Revitalizing Everyday Thinking From the Inside Out

Jeannie Kristufek
IBM Corporation

Abstract—How can you change the way a society, or even just your team, thinks about technology? In an age where many of us are constantly chasing the next best thing or are routinely bogged down in the everyday grind, it can be increasingly difficult to keep our heads up and maintain an innovative focus on developing new ideas if doing so is not actually within our specific job scope. The recognition of this fact caused the Enterprise Networking and Transformation Solutions (ENTS) area within IBM to form a team in 2006 to encourage innovative thinking and promote an innovative internal culture amongst all the area employees. This effort has been a success and continues to grow, and this team's model can easily be extended to other cultures or groups which may struggle with the same hurdles. This discussion will cover the recognized challenges associated with reaching and inspiring team members to be innovative, how to stimulate creative thinking, how to determine the true business value and risk associated with implementation of a new idea, and how to reward innovators and implementers of these ideas.

We have taken a two-prong approach to attack the task of cultivating an innovative team in our area by dedicating one team specifically to growing and promoting an innovative culture, and a second team of "Innovation Advocates" to actively mine our community for new ideas and aid in moving those ideas to implementation. These two teams work closely together to fulfill our overall mission, and the efforts of both teams will be discussed in this paper.

Growing an Innovative Culture

The first team we created to foster innovation within our area is our Grow Innovation Focus Team, or GIFT. This team consists of managers and technical leaders who have volunteered and were chosen to participate for their passion and commitment to innovation, and are charged with finding ways to promote a safe, comfortable, and rewarding environment for sharing new innovative ideas, as well as assisting and advising the Innovation Advocates in their crusade to extract ideas from the overall community.

The Grow Innovation Focus Team is also responsible for determining and challenging the existing physical and psychological barriers which may be inhibiting members of our area to bring forward new ideas. Some of the most common inhibitors we identified in our crusade to improve our internal culture were:

- 1) Resistance to Change.** Resistance to change can develop for several reasons. First, if an employee has been performing a certain function for years and is comfortable with a technique, process, or tool, the initial overhead in learning a new way of doing things may not be appealing, despite the promise of results that can ultimately positively impact their productivity or overall help the business.

2) Fear of failure or rejection of ideas. There may also be a fear of failure associated with the risk of challenging an existing technical or procedural infrastructure. Maintaining the status quo seems “safe”. This fear can unfortunately be reinforced if the community as a whole does not understand and support the notion that there are no “stupid ideas”.

3) Lack of time for Innovation. Time constraints are very real. We all are trying to accomplish many goals and are often pressed for time. It can be much easier to concentrate on the assigned tasks at hand without additionally considering creating projects for the team for the future.

4) Too much risk, too little reward. Creating and cultivating a new idea requires initiative, energy, tenacity, and passion, unfortunately coupled with the knowledge that there is some chance that the idea will not move to implementation.

5) Apathy toward innovation. There may be folks who do their job and do it well, without taking extra initiative to exact change or look to the future of the business. They may think that as an individual that innovation is not within their job scope, or they are content with implementing the ideas of others.

6) Resources not available. Individuals may have excellent ideas but immediately lack the skills or equipment to implement them, and not know how to engage the right people for the job.

A focus we have identified to target these barriers to innovation is that it is important to recognize the emotional investment a potential innovator has in his or her idea. There can be such a great amount of intimidation associated with making a suggestion and having it reviewed by peers and managers, that many of these potential innovators can decide that the mental and emotional roller coaster associated with the process is not worth the risk. How many times have we heard someone say any of the following phrases in our meetings, no matter what industry we are in?

- 1) **We tried that before and it failed.**
- 2) **Don't you have more important things to be working on?**
- 3) **That's the way we've always done it.**
- 4) **We'll get back to that later.**
- 5) **Why fix something that isn't broken?**
- 6) **Nobody will ever agree to that.**

Now imagine how that makes someone feel who is passionate about their idea and already nervous about bringing attention to it. Would that person feel encouraged to pursue this idea or bring forward another one in the future?

Our campaign to help prevent these types of negative interactions included a five minute video that was shown to our entire product area that humorously drew attention to how you can easily stifle innovation through negativity or passivity without even being aware that you are doing it at the time. We called these folks who stifle innovation “zappers” and followed the video presentation with an anti-zapping poster campaign. The effects of this campaign have been positive – not only has it created an awareness in the zappers themselves to think twice before they use one of the zapping phrases listed above, but now by having a term to identify the feeling

associated with the rejection of their ideas, it has also empowered those who are being or have been zapped to fight back when they feel they are being zapped in the future.

To attack the potential problem of apathy toward innovation, we decided we needed to create greater positive energy associated with innovation. Just as with any campaign for a new product or idea, good advertising can make or break an effort. We have sponsored poster campaigns to promote our innovation advocates as resources, as well as the innovators themselves. We also felt that management buy-in at higher levels within the company would definitely be positively influential, so we also solicited upper management to speak at a town hall meeting about his perception on our mission, and he eloquently stressed that our actions towards furthering innovation are important to the future of the business.

Because one of our hurdles is the perceived lack of time for activities centered on innovation, we also needed to make it clear that although there are indeed focused brainstorming sessions to help fuel innovation, anyone can innovate on their own at anytime. For example, one of the easiest ways to include innovation in the every day is to summarize meetings, conferences, or other interactions with either a mental or verbal challenge to identify if any new concepts have been identified and if so, take ownership either individually or as a group to pursue or record them. People can ask themselves at the end of any task if there was any way they could have performed it faster or more efficiently, or if there are any tools that could make them more productive. We encourage people to write these ideas down right away – ideas can be lost due to lack of time for immediate implementation, but if a record is made there is much more chance that a team or individual will go back when time allows to pursue them

In 2006, IBM hosted a Global Innovation Jam, the aim of which was to have a global brainstorming session with IBM employees, their clients and business partners, and even family members centered around four different key areas: travel, finance and commerce, health, and environment. This corporate-wide event helped to reinforce the importance of innovation amongst our teams, as well as its overall value to IBM. The GIFT team further used this event to fuel our particular area's understanding of just how much focus IBM has toward it's innovation efforts with heavy advertisement, as well as setting up conference rooms stocked with tasty treats where participants could drop in and out and fluidly discuss ideas related to the Jam. An Innovation Advocate was available to help ensure that no ideas were lost and were properly submitted to the Jam for feedback.

Finally, submitting an innovative idea for consideration should be rewarded, even if it is not immediately implemented. The most influential incentive for a person to change a behavior is to have a positive association with the act, so it naturally follows that if you reward an innovator for bringing forward an idea, they will be more apt to do it again. Even if ideas are deemed not feasible or not business-justifiable as they are further developed or move to the implementation phase, the initial reward will reassure the innovator that their efforts were not wasted and that it is worth the exercise to try again.

Rewards do not need to be monetary – positive feedback and encouragement, or even just recognition by peers and management of the initiative it takes to propose an idea can be reward enough. Furthermore, if other team members are seeing their peers recognized for being

innovative, they will also incur positive associations with this activity and will also be more likely start thinking of how they can be innovative as well.

Our current reward for submitting a new innovative idea is an award certificate and a free lunch or gigantic candy bar, as well as area-wide recognition. As these ideas are implemented, further rewards are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Advocating, Generating, Collecting, and Implementing New Ideas

Just as important as creating a safe, comfortable environment to breed new ideas, is finding ways to access untapped resources of innovation and move the new ideas to implementation. To do this, we have created a dedicated team, called the Innovation Advocates. These Advocates were chosen from a pool of volunteers, also for their passion, commitment, and drive to further innovation in our community and in IBM as a whole.

To collect innovative ideas from our teams which can specifically impact our area, the Innovation Advocates have created a wiki. This has proven to be an invaluable tool – not simply because it provides a centralized location to view and record ideas, but also because wikis inherently promote collaboration and discussion across a larger viewing audience. In addition to being a place for innovators to submit ideas, it is also a place for potential implementers to view projects they may want to work on or comment on how they feel a solution may be designed. We have since inception of our program in April of 2006, collected 29 ideas from our area in the wiki, several of which have been or are now in the process of being implemented.

IBM as a whole also has an online community called ThinkPlace, where innovative ideas can be shared and discussed amongst all of its employees. Ideas which get the most comments, support, or other activity will be considered for implementation, encouraging collaboration and supporting the credo that anyone can be an innovator. If an idea submitted to our area's wiki has a larger reach or scope than for just our area, the Innovation Advocates will encourage an innovator to submit the idea to ThinkPlace. For more information about ThinkPlace, visit http://domino.watson.ibm.com/comm/www_innovate.nsf/pages/ourselves.thinkplace.html.

Seeding Creativity

One of the main functions of the Innovation Advocates is to mine ideas from our overall area. There are innovators in our midst who are constantly thinking of new ideas on how to improve the product and the business, and have no qualms about taking the time to promote their ideas passionately despite the risk of being “zapped”. But there are also innovators who do not yet know they are innovators. These are the resources in which the advocates are most interested.

We cannot force someone to be innovative, but if we plant the right seeds in the mind of someone who thinks they are not or cannot be innovative we can often make magic happen. Focused brainstorming sessions can turn someone who does not think they have new ideas into a rainmaker.

Seeding these brainstorming sessions can be as easy as having an Advocate gather a group of people into a conference room and use any of the following suggestions or techniques to kick off a focused discussion:

- 1) Make a list of all the tools that are commonly used by the team you have gathered, and pose the question: "Is there anything you do not like about this tool, and if so, how would you change or improve it?"
- 2) Create a list of topics, either technical or procedural, which could help increase productivity or usability, and solicit suggestions. The Advocate is responsible for keeping the room positively focused on the single topic at hand.

Another interesting approach is to use improvisation theater techniques to fuel creativity. The Harvard Management Communication Letter has published two fascinating articles called "Improv in the Workplace", and "Stand up and Throw Away the Script", citing the use of improv in the workplace to not only seed and encourage creativity, but to also "strengthen your team's skills in four key areas of communication: listening to others, building on others' work, being honest with your team, and accepting the team's work". Improv also thrives on positive energy and humor, and has mechanisms in place to prevent negating the ideas of others and "blocking" or stifling of forward movement. And as Robert Lowe, founder and CEO of Improvisation, Inc says in "Improv in the Workplace", "Some kind of motivation or willingness is about all that's required. I've worked with maybe 10,000 people on improv, and I've only seen a couple who just couldn't do it. All it really takes is a willingness to be there. It doesn't take any special skills".

A couple of the basic exercises of improv are:

- 1) **"Yes, and..."** Saying "No" immediately stops a discussion from moving forward. A more subtle version of saying "No" is the "Yes, but..." – the "Yes" part of this phrase may at first seem like a validation or affirmation of what was previously stated, but the "but" is an automatic negation and an attempt to contradict. In "Stand up and Throw Away the Script", Stevie Ray, executive director of Stevie Ray's Improv Company states "By their very nature, the two words *but* and *however* compare two ideas. One idea must win, which risks damaging the relationship. *So* and *and* force you to make two ideas work together – 'You're right that this will cost more money, so why don't we....' Not using *but* or *however* forces me to speak and think in ways that marry two ideas together."
- 2) **Talks.** Talks are sixty second unprepared talks about the pros and cons of a particular subject in which an individual is not an expert, but is familiar. The idea behind a talk of this nature is that it often is very easy to come up with about 20-30 seconds but the extra time and the presence of an audience forces you and your audience to dig deeper. After each talk time should be allowed to discuss the pros and cons with the audience to determine if there are areas in which there is room for improvement. It is also important that each individual in the room takes a turn so that no one person feels singled out.
- 3) **Word Association.** Gather a group of people in a conference room. Seed the group with a process, tool or idea and cycle around the room having each individual say the first word or a short phrase that comes to mind when he or she thinks of that subject. Once everyone has given their input, discuss what made each person select their word or phrase, and how the contributions of others influence how they think of the item at hand. This

exercise can provide a good basis for brainstorming on how to improve existing infrastructures.

We have attempted a few pilot meetings where improv was used to spur energy and creativity with some success, and are discussing how we can further exploit these principles in our future efforts.

Implementation

The other main function of the Innovation Advocates is to assist innovators in finding ways to implement ideas. Often, an innovator will have a great idea but not know how to pursue it, not have the relevant technical skills, or will not have time due to other business needs to pursue the idea. Each new idea submitted to our innovation wiki has an Innovation Advocate assigned to it, and the role of the Advocate in this context is to connect the innovator with the right people to help them implement or further develop their idea. This could mean setting up meetings or one-on-one discussions with members of our team or other groups, soliciting our own area for specific skills, or determining what education may be needed and work with the innovator to attain those skills themselves. An advocate really acts as a facilitator for the innovator to prevent ideas from going nowhere.

Finally, Advocates help determine the priority of implementation of new ideas. There are many factors which determine priority, including availability of correct resources, business need and impact, as well as scope of the effort. For example, if the idea is deemed high priority the advocate may also engage the correct resources to develop a business case for pursuing it.

It is important to note that in our model, the ownership of the innovative idea belongs to the innovator and the Advocate's role is to assist and help ensure the idea is not lost or forgotten, as so many good ideas unfortunately are due to any of the barriers to innovation we have discovered or encountered. The innovator is responsible for submitting the idea to the wiki and driving their idea, with or without the help of their assigned Advocate. An Advocate can be also an innovator or an implementer, as many of our Advocates are.

Measurable Results

Ultimately the goal of promoting innovation is to show positive measurable results. Some projects which are gleaned from this campaign will take considerable time to design and implement, and the overall impact to the business is not yet known, nor will we fully be able to quantify that total impact for some time.

What we do know already is that we have had success, both in increasing awareness and in actual gathering of viable ideas on our wiki. We have collected a wide variety of ideas ranging from process change to technical projects to suggestions on how to make innovation itself more effective. All these ideas have champions in the Advocates, and support towards eyeing implementation, if they have not already yet been implemented.

Perhaps the most important aspect of our GIFT team and the Innovation Advocates is to recognize that even though innovation starts with the individual, it requires support and respect

from your peers, management, and entire company. None of us is as good as all of us. In the quest to drive our industry further into the 21st century and beyond, this sentiment is crucial.

Looking to the Future

There is always more we can do to help mine innovation as well as help impress the importance of creativity on our team. Some suggestions we are considering to further promote our mission in 2007 are:

- 1) Workshops on stimulating creativity
- 2) Newsletters showcasing current ideas posted to our wiki as well those which need implementation assistance
- 3) Producing more humorous internal commercials in the spirit of innovation
- 4) Sponsoring contests for the best new ideas

Summary

In summary, innovation is not just an important strategy for our individual teams, a particular area, or even IBM as a company. If you do a simple Google search on “innovation”, you will find that it is imperative to any business, educational system, or community to recognize the importance of generating and discussing new ideas, and with those ideas shaping the way that we live and work. Without a commitment to innovation, there is too much chance for a failure to thrive. Innovation is not a new concept, but its popularity is creating a cultural revolution. It is how our society is going to take its bold next steps into the future.

References

(February 2001). Improv in the Workplace. *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, Article Reprint No. C0102D.

Parker, S.G (2003). Stand Up and Throw Away the Script. *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, Article Reprint No. C0302A.

Author Contact Information

Jeannie Kristufek, kristufe@us.ibm.com