

Innovation Quality

Management Guidance Required

Since innovation success or the lack thereof makes or breaks a business, innovation is clearly a top management topic. Seen from management perspective, innovation is an entrepreneurial bet, gambling substantial business resources on successful innovation and requiring consecutive decisions whether to quit the bet or to continue and raise the stakes. Deciding on the entrepreneurial bet is a top management topic as well.

Since these decisions are done based on data from the innovation process, innovation quality should be a top management topic as well but seldom is. While management sometimes ignores innovation quality entirely, the standard response is delegation.

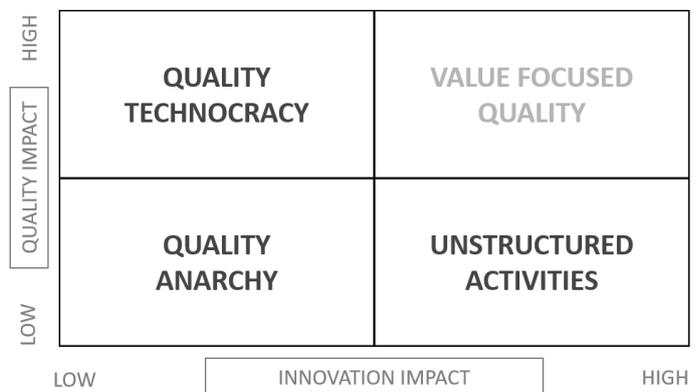
Innovation units and quality units receive the task to reach an “acceptable” solution and, failing that, are told to “meet somewhere in the middle”. This delegation technique bears the risk of costly failure. To start with, “meeting in the middle” must not fit business needs or management expectations and seldom does.

Meeting in the Middle

Usually the opposite sides start any discussion with rather opposite views on the topic innovation quality. While quality units tend towards “the more rules and regulations the better”, the innovation units view can frequently be described with “the less the better, none is best”. Apart from being antithetic, these positions have also an emotional background, originating in fear of failure and the fear of being made responsible for failure. In short, the starting positions translate to “in case of failure, quality should not be guilty” and “innovation units need to deliver results, not filled forms”. Opposite opinions, deeply set on an emotional level, not the best starting point for reaching an “acceptable” solution “somewhere in the middle”.

What and Why

In business, the best way to start any discussion is to decide why the discussion is taking place at all and what kind of objective should be achieved. In case of innovation quality, deciding “why” and “what” boils down to deciding on the acceptable risk profile and the acceptable resource investment. In most organisations, decisions on



„Extreme Positions, Strong Emotions - Supposed to Meet in the Middle.“

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risk and resources are taken by top management, being completely out of competence scope for lower to middle hierarchy, such as a team discussing about an “acceptable” innovation quality solution. Lacking the power to decide “why” and “what”, the team will focus on “how”.

How to Waste Resources

“How” discussions fuelled by opposing views belong to the most time consuming and pointless activities taking place in business. In case of innovation quality, highly payed specialists will discuss “how many forms to be filled”, “how often”, “how many signatures”, “how many copies to archive” and so on without ever clarifying “why” the form should be filled in the first place and “what” would be the purpose of the form once filled. “How” discussions spin in endless circles towards the lowest common denominator, which is nothing but a lukewarm compromise without any economic value.

Of course, things can always get worse, for example by overlaying the “meet in the middle” discussion with personal interests of the participants. Hierarchical power, eloquence, networking capabilities or simply the ego of single participants will shift the discussion result from the “arithmetic” middle towards a personal best fit which is even more unlikely to match business needs or management expectations.



„How“ instead of „What“ and „Why“

Game Changer Management Guidance

The root cause of the frequently observed abysmal performance of innovation quality is missing management guidance. Without management guidance, the paramount questions “why do we invest in innovation quality” and “what objectives do we want to achieve” will remain unanswered. Without management guidance regarding the quality strategy, companies will end up with “how” driven innovation quality, wasting indeed resources and strangling innovation.

Worse, the “how” driven innovation quality will entirely fail to deliver the value it was supposed to bring along – a solid database to be used by the management when deciding on the entrepreneurial bet.

More to the “how” focus versus the “why” and “what” focus in one of the next issues.

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