# Innovation Theatre and Stage Props

Innovative Organisations Part 1

Truly innovative organisations move with time, adapting to new trends of creativity, applying every tool that becomes available in their permanent strive to become even more innovative. Office clubs to boost communication, inspiration voyages to Silicon Valley to learn from the innovation front runners or cloud-based innovation platforms to funnel the creativity of the crowd into the company's innovation pipeline. If you want to be best you need the best tools. Is that really true? Let's have a closer look.

Office Clubs Boosting Communication

Communication is one of the favourite pastimes of most humans and Innovation Units in industry are no exception. Extensive, noisy, frequent, too frequent, rational, emotional – there is practically no limit to the facets of human communication, frequently to the annoyance of the respective employers. Given this obsession, communication deficits like communicating about each other instead of with each other indicate serious trouble in the organisation. Office clubs and coffee corners belong to the standard tools being applied by management when communication ceased to be.
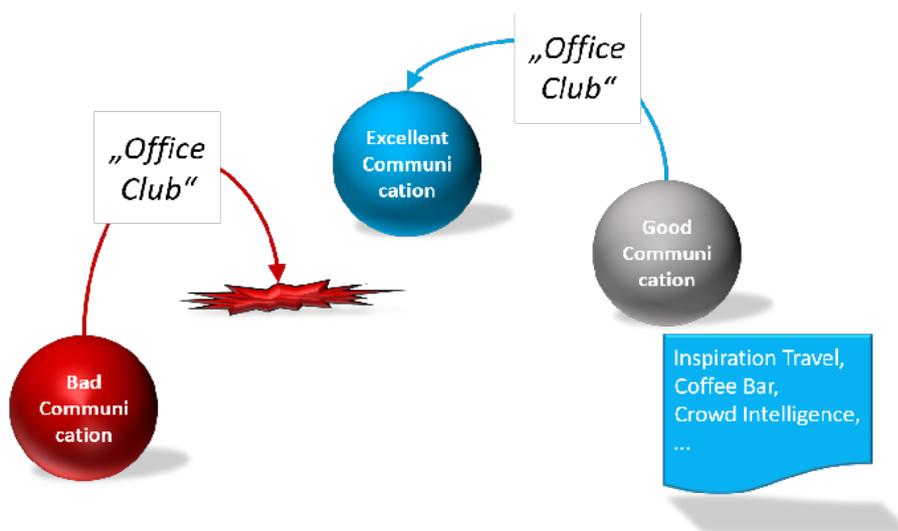
Funny enough, organisations with good or at least reasonable communication rarely feel the need to improve by wasting space for comfortable lounges or fancy speciality coffee machines. Mainly companies with abysmally bad communication invest in this kind of tool, hoping to improve the easy way by simply spending some money – mostly with disastrous results.

„Office club, inspiration voyage, wisdom of the crowd."

„Effective Tools or Stage Props?"

Communication blockades originate in personal problems like conflicts or mistrust, in emotional problems like fear or in organisational problems like serious lack of time. Office clubs, no matter how cosy they are, will not solve this kind of problem.

Stage Props for Innovation Theatre

Looking behind the glamourous façade, office clubs and coffee corners are the hopeless and helpless attempt to solve cultural and organisational problems with architectonical and culinary measures. They are stage props for an innovation theatre, acting the play called "innovation failure". And just as in real theatre, stage props do not improve a badly acted play. As long as the actors are unable or unwilling to bring their part convincingly to the stage, a nicer scenery thanks to some stage props will not make a difference.

Of course, office clubs have the potential to boost good communication towards excellent, simply by adding a touch of comfort, inviting people to communicate a bit longer, a bit more relaxed or a bit more focused. Bad communication due to conflicts, mistrust or fear, however, will not improve. In this case, the investment in office clubs and coffee corners is mainly a band aid for management conscience, having done "something" for communication while entirely ignoring the real problems.

"Starting point makes the difference."

Inspiration Pilgrimage

With innovation failing on a regular basis, some organisations set out for inspiration pilgrimage, frequently to places where the holy grail of innovation is supposed to be hidden, such as Silicon Valley. Interestingly, a lot of what they are out searching is readily available at home by simply downloading publications from the net. Google for instance has put the company's innovation principles in the public domain, summing up in detail how Google manages innovation.

Number 6 of those principles is the famous "20% time", basically allowing people to allocate 20% of work time to projects that may be out of scope of their job or out of scope of Google's core business. Since Google is doing well on the innovation front, their innovation principles might be considered a perfect blue-print, to be copied immediately by any other company.

"Acceptance problem versus insight problem."

At least in this case, innovation problems experienced by companies do not originate in insight or knowledge problems that could be solved by a pilgrimage to Google's headquarter. Dried up innovation pipelines frequently originate in acceptance or execution problems, with management balking at the very idea of Innovation Unit's employees doing simply what they like for one day per week.

Once again, Innovation Pilgrimage is a stage prob that is supposed to improve a badly acted play, failing miserably to do so. At the end of the day, "No Action" is as bad as "No Action after travel to Google headquarter" but at least cheaper.

Wisdom of the Crowd

With experts failing to deliver, a large crowd of non-experts interacting more or less randomly with each other will do the trick – this is in a nutshell the "wisdom of the crowd" concept. To get that from the ground as fast as possible, fancy cloud based "crowd intelligence platforms" are established, supposed to funnel the creativity of the entire organisation into the dried-up innovation pipeline.

"Crowd funnel."

Whether crowd-based innovation works in an ideal set-up is subject to intensive discussion, its imminent failure in non-ideal surroundings is not. Many companies do not have a creativity problem, they have a sender-receiver problem. Innovative ideas created somewhere in the organisation evaporate in organisational nirvana long before reaching any responsible decision body.

"Evaporating ideas."

As soon as the sender-receiver problem is mainly at located the receiving end, wisdom of the crowd will fail to deliver whether it is supported with a cloud-based tool or not. The tool will improve the sending of ideas, having at the same time no impact on how well the "receivers" perform their job. Again, a stage prop, in this case barking up the entirely wrong tree.

The Limitations of Stage Props

Stage props provide a better scenery on stage, nothing more, nothing less. While a well-acted play may benefit from a nice scenery, a badly acted will not. Management trying to fix serious organisational or personal problems by investing resources in costly and cosy stage props is mainly paving the ground for a never-ending Innovation Theatre instead of value adding innovation.

"Better scenery."

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Management beats Innovation Theatre

When stage props reach their impact limitations, real innovation management is called for. Which facets of communication are deficient? What kind of impact do they have on innovation processes? How would an ideal communication work? What are the road blocks that prevent the Innovation Unit to go from one to the other? Honest and ruthless answers to these questions will deliver a status quo and an objective worth to go for. All that remains is to start going. And once the objective is achieved, an office club and a fancy speciality coffee machine make a nice icing on the cake of smooth communication.

„Investing effort beats investing in stage props."

Measuring Success

Successful innovation management will impact innovation culture which in turn will serve as a very sensitive probe to measure changes that really matter. Innovation Units pressing management for decisions. Moon shots smart enough for success being presented to decision bodies. Mindless project plan adherence replaced with fast track concepts.

In short, Innovation Units should feel to management agile, focused, demanding and even a bit inconvenient to be ultimately successful. If this can be achieved – perfect. If not, just give me a call.

More on how to do get this done in one of the next issues.