Leaders as Innovators

LEADERSHIP PRODUCT 7
May 2017

Society of Leadership Fellows
St George's House, Windsor Castle
Introduction

This product draws on the key ideas that emerged through a Leadership Conversation that took place at St George’s House, Windsor Castle on 2-3 May 2017. It was the seventh in a series of Conversations organised by our Society of Leadership Fellows.

As with all of our leadership products, this has been written primarily for Fellows unable to join the Conversation. Its purpose is to share the ideas that emerged from our discussions as widely as possible among our Society’s leadership community.
Innovation is about responding to change in a creative way; generating new ideas, conducting R&D, improving processes or revamping products and services. It’s also a mindset in your business.

Business Development Company

Technically, “innovation” is defined merely as “introducing something new;” there are no qualifiers of how ground-breaking or world-shattering that something needs to be only that it needs to be better than what was there before.

Business Week

The process of translating an idea or invention into a good or service that creates value or for which customers will pay.

Business Dictionary

Innovation: a creation (a new device or process) resulting from study and experimentation; introducing something new.

Wordnet
As a leader of innovation - nine questions to help me become more effective

When I talk about innovation, what do I mean by it?

Some talk of innovation as just being about development and execution, after the stage where ideas have been nurtured and grown.

Others talk more generally about innovation being about ideas-building + execution + follow-up. They argue that staff become more attracted to the idea of becoming innovators if they can connect with the ideas behind proposed innovations.

Note to self
I need to know what I mean by innovation. Whatever definition I go for, I need to spell out the prize that I hope we will gain through innovations, without overloading people with more context than they need.
When I discuss innovations with others, how much should I share ‘the WHY’? Or should I just concentrate on the HOW and WHAT?

If I take a broader definition of innovation, it’s more natural to share the “why”. I can explain the ideas and ambitions that are driving the innovation process and spell out what I hope we’ll achieve if and when the innovations come to pass.

If I concentrate solely on innovation as execution, I need to be clear about my wider strategy for fostering a culture of innovation. I need to argue the case for innovation at a more general level, in a way that inspires people to bring forward ideas for doing things differently - and better.

Note to self:
One of my priorities is to promote a stronger culture of innovation. Understanding the why could really raise people’s motivation and confidence to become innovators themselves.
I know that different businesses have different systems for considering new ideas. One CEO told me that their people produce a one-side concept paper if they have an idea for an innovation. In some businesses, the technical people do full-scale proposals and drawings for an innovation and present them to their Development Director.

I am a little hesitant about asking people to draw up detailed plans before discussing their ideas, although I know there’s one killer question for anyone with a new idea: precisely how would it work?

Note to self:
I need to make a point of asking whether our processes encourage people to come up with ideas and kick them around with others. I’m not sure they do.
If other Directors agree, I need to ask them about their ideas for improvement before sharing my own.
Some businesses make a point of telling their people that if they have any ideas for innovations, they first need to explain how they would work. They are asked to focus on ensuring the idea is technically robust, before promoting the positive business impact it could bring. I know that some innovations are incredibly complex. BUT I’m really not sure about keeping the technical case for an innovation separate from the business case in this way.

I worry that this split approach could be very disempowering for the technical team. I could tell them I like their ideas and then a few weeks later, having done the figures, announce we’ve decided that the business benefits aren’t big enough to justify doing anything with them. That might well make them feel “next time we have an idea, don’t let’s bother!”

**Note to self:**

I will send a note round my people saying that when we discuss ideas for innovation it would be good to talk through the business case once we’re all clear how the innovation would work. Even though we won’t be able to come up with detailed forecasts, we should have a pretty good understanding of the possible business benefits that the idea could bring.
When people are pitching to me, how should I respond?
Concentrate on keeping quiet and listening—or question and probe?

Some Directors have a policy of holding back when people do their pitch. They may ask a few questions and then just listen—and decide afterwards whether to take the idea on to the next stage and work up the business case.

I tend to make a point of asking quite probing questions of those who pitch to me. They might have drawn up a concept paper, but I feel I learn much more about the potential of their ideas from how they answer my questions.

I make a point of saying what I think about the ideas there and then. So whilst I may take a few days to think them through, the team feel that they know where they stand with me.

I do wonder whether it’s right to hold back and just listen when a team are pitching for a particular innovation. I can see the advantage that you’re not making any commitments in the heat of the moment. But as a leadership model, I’m not convinced.

If we’re not even demonstrating curiosity as leaders, and trying to get behind what people are saying to us, what sort of statement are we making about our style of leadership?

Note to self:
In principle, I want to be as curious and transparent as I can be. So when people are putting forward their proposals I will be up for drawing them out as much as I can and saying what I think, making clear that I’m still forming an opinion and nothing is chipped in tablets of stone.
If I have to say “no”, how do I say so?

Aha, the case against being fully transparent! If I have to say no, I wouldn’t have to say so to their face. I can see the benefits of this — and as I think this, I know it’s wrong. If I’m not keen on an idea, or I think the costs might outweigh the benefits, I think I have an obligation to say this there and then.

I know that what I mustn’t be is dismissive. I need to thank them for all their efforts and suggest how the idea might be stronger. If this means modifying it significantly, I need to be ready to say so, stressing that I would be happy to talk to them again as soon as they have a revised proposition.

Note to self:
- When I say no, I should also say that I hope to be able to give them a yes when they come back with a revised proposal!
- I also need to make a point of congratulating them on the tenacity they have already shown in moving their ideas as far forward as they have done.
Do we have some sort of “sandbox” for trying out innovations?

I am a great enthusiast for innovations and relish the opportunity to discuss ideas about how things might be done better. I am also very clear that innovations only flourish when the wider culture is right and people are given every encouragement to be ruthless with their own ideas so that if they’re not working they are the first ones to say so.

This is why I like the language of having a “sandbox” where we try out innovations and let ourselves reshape and remodel them early on as we test them out in practice.

I know of so many situations where people become over-attached to “their” ideas and find it really difficult to start afresh if something hasn’t worked in the way they intended. This is why, whenever we back a new idea, I want it to be clear that we expect its advocates and sponsors to be ready to recast it as they test it out, without anyone letting their ego get in their way.

Note to Self:
At my next team meeting, ask the team to sign up to the principle that those proposing innovations are always encouraged to build in processes for continuous review – feedback, ongoing tweaking and innovation.
When I drive an innovation myself, am I as tough on myself as I am on others?

We all know that some of the most innovative leaders can be the least democratic! They also tend to be very intuitive.

Whilst it is a great strength, it can easily keep people trapped in the “I'm right” school of thinking! They can miss some of the early warning signals that their innovation isn’t working in the way intended. When they finally accept things have been going wrong for quite some time, the stakes are higher than they should be.

I need to be pretty tough on myself and invite others to be robust with me in working through innovations I propose. Under scrutiny, if the idea isn’t sound, I need to be the first to say so.

Also, I need to be up-front in saying that if we really want to become more innovative we all need to make sure that our fear of failure doesn’t get in our way.

I’ve always liked the phrase “right next time”. It enables us to take some risks and go with the flow, sharing the mindset that if we’re not right this time there is always the next!

Note to self:
Share the message that we all need to be tough on our own ideas as well as those of others. That includes me! Everyone needs to know that I respond well to challenge. Simply put, I need to walk the talk – and that’s precisely what I intend to do.
Innovation begins with playing with ideas. The challenge is to create a safe space in which to experiment.

In the past, I have been involved in some competitions for new ideas that have been terrific fun. We have split people into small teams and invited each one to come up with its own distinctive innovation. We have all had a vote for the idea that we favour the most (excluding our own, of course!) and have awarded a generous prize to the winning idea. At other times, we have offered prizes for the innovation that has had the greatest impact after three months in the sandpit! There is so much that can and should be done to make innovation fun.

**Note to self:**
Tell people I want to make innovation more fun and ask for their ideas. Maybe I should consider introducing a prize for the most innovative idea that is developed in a way that enables staff to have real fun putting it together?
“Ideas won’t keep. Something must be done about them.”

Alfred North Whitehead