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Questions & Answers
TRAINING STAFF TO INNOVATE

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Successful service firms compete through innovation because how a service is designed and delivered is in large part not protected by patent or copyright. This set of ten questions and answers provides ideas and exercises for how to train staff in continual innovation.

1. How can I stimulate creativity in staff?

Creativity is the ability to make unexpected connections and realign ideas into new relationships. Creative thinking is a core skill in any innovative process, along with the ability to successfully implement change, and assumes (practice in) the ability to think divergently. There are three aspects of creativity that are directly related to innovation:

a)   "Breaking set," or the ability to think outside of conventional or traditional assumptions.
This skill is premised on there <u>not</u> being one right answer. Here are some ways to help staff think outside their normal boundaries:

- *Reversed assumptions:* List as many assumptions as you can. Then ask, "What if we assumed the opposite? What would the consequences be?"

- *Metaphorical thinking*: Select a different system that you can use as a metaphor (e.g., a transportation network). List all of the features of the metaphorical system. Then look to see if there are any implications you can see for your own service system.

- *Outrageous ideas*: State the problem you wish to solve, and then ask everyone to propose the most outrageous solutions they can imagine. Once the laughter has died down, see if the list of proposals suggests a solution to your problem.

b)   Lateral thinking, or the ability to make connections between seemingly unrelated areas.
This skill is premised on the process of "synergetics," which assumes that insights in one arena can be extrapolated to another. The most common technique to increase lateral thinking is through the process of scanning a number of diverse concepts or sourcing of information and then forcing the identification of linkages (e.g., "what do x and y have in common?").

c) Multiple options, or the ability to move beyond the more obvious initial ideas.
This skill is based on the idea that there is not one "right" answer but rather a range of possibilities. For example, take a common office object (e.g., a coffee pot) and brainstorm at least 20 different uses for it. You will find that you begin with the most common ones and gradually become more creative and outrageous in your suggestions.

2. How can I use brainstorming in the innovation development process?

"Brainstorming" refers to the spontaneous pooling of ideas by having members of a group volunteer as many ideas as possible as rapidly as possible.

For brainstorming to work well, the facilitator of the process should list the ideas in the person's own words without allowing any judgement (such as "that's a crazy idea"). If ideas are critiqued as they emerge, participants will stop making suggestions for fear of being wrong.

If you are concerned that there will be peer pressure to screen out certain ideas that could be innovate, you can elect a "silent brainstorm" where participants list as many ideas as possible on a piece of paper and then submit them anonymously.

3. How can I help staff assess innovation options?

Once a number of ideas have been generated, then they need to be evaluated for appropriateness and feasibility. Assessment assumes the opposite skill set from creativity - the ability to converge, or come to common agreement on a single option. Techniques that can help with the assessment process include the following:

- *Weighing the pros and cons*
  Here staff list the pros and cons for each idea and then select options where the positives outweigh the negatives.

- *Performing a root cause analysis*
  Here staff determine why there is an issue and which of the options would resolve it.

- *Paired options*
  Here staff rate each option in relation to every other option, with the highest scored item being selected.

4. How can I help staff assess customer needs?

Being able to identify a customer's need is a critical skill for any service staff. For both to be satisfied, a customer wanting personalized attention and a customer wanting the fastest possible service ("in-and-out") need to be approached differently. Sometimes service operations are arranged so that customers can "stream" themselves towards an in-person meeting or automated assistance, for example.

In helping staff determine customers' needs, have them continually ask themselves, "What is my evidence? Why do I think that 'x' is the customer's real need?" You can help staff develop flexibility in what the customer's need might by by using ideas like the following:

- Think of a service that you normally use for convenience and speed (e.g., an automatic teller machine) and brainstorm which ways the service would have to change in order to be designed so that you felt like a "valued customer."

- Pick a sample customer and brainstorm about the person's possible needs and how you would verify that you were correct. Then brainstorm which behaviours would signal to you how strongly the customer values the benefit that your service can provide and what they might be willing to pay for it.

5. How can I train staff to design new services?

One of the advantages that a service firm has is that all staff use a range of services all the time and so they can become experts in identifying what will and will not work well in a new service. Three skill sets in particular need attention:

a)   *Analyzing one's own service experience*
     In order to help staff use their experience with other service providers to identify potential innovations, try asking them these questions:

  - How did I feel about the service experience (special, appreciated, annoyed, frustrated, ignored, etc.)?
  - Why did I feel that way? What happened that contributed to my feeling?
  - What did I learn from that service experience about what affects how a customer feels?
  - Of what I learned, what part could I apply to our service?

b)   *Practising extrapolation*
     Often times good ideas come from trends in other industries. You can help staff develop the habit of lateral thinking by a technique such as the following:

     Share a new trend in another industry (e.g., one-stop service) and ask staff to brainstorm possible implications for your own firm's services. That brainstorm could occur during a staff training session, or more routinely by internal communication (e.g., by e-mail).

c)   *Analyzing the actual service flow*
     Identify all of the steps in the service delivery process, whether executed by the customer or by staff. You can then look for opportunities to streamline, to add value, or to establish service standards. Similarly, you

can analyze the physical cues in the service environment to make sure that they reinforce the message you want customers to receive.

6. **How can I support staff in implementing changes?**

At its core, innovation is a change process. Being able to manage that change process will make the difference between success and failure. All too often, managers assume that, once a new concept has been pilot tested, the roll-out will be virtually automatic. In actuality, it seldom works that way. To help ensure success, you can take the following steps:

- Establish a timeline for roll-out and solicit comments from staff to make sure that it is realistic.

- Establish a time for review of the roll-out no later than three months after the start so that there is a natural time to make corrections and adjustments.

You can both improve your competitiveness and give staff practice in successful implementation by selecting at least one international best practice and walking through the implementation process with staff.

7. **How can I train staff to address customer expectations?**

Because services are ultimately delivered in interaction with customers, whether face-to-face or at a distance, staff need to be able to articulate the benefits that customers can expect to receive from the service as well as make sure that they understand what the firm cannot control ("attribution of responsibility"). Staff need to be trained and empowered to customize appropriately and recover when customers are unhappy, with an awareness that excellent recovery can actually make a customer *more* loyal than before the difficulty.

8. **How can I support different cognitive styles in staff?**

Culturally there are two primary and contrasting ways in which persons are taught to reason and draw conclusions. Aristotelian logic and the "scientific" method (e.g., American and British traditions) are based on *induction*, where one starts with a general principle and draws a conclusion by applying or testing the principle in specific cases. Cartesian logic (the French tradition) is based on *deduction*, where one considers a number of particular cases and then derives a general principle. Recent research from Japan has criticized the inductive method and its associated benchmarking methodology as limiting "value" innovation, and has asserted that the more intuitive (deductive) Japanese method is more likely to result in true knowledge creation.

Unless you are is careful, differences in reasoning between cultures can lead to serious miscommunication. Innovation requires the cross-fertilization of ideas that comes from interaction with persons who may have different cognitive styles. If staff do not understand that cognitive styles differ, they are much more likely to personalize the resulting conflict. You can help by educating staff to style differences (e.g., using a

typology like the Myers-Briggs) and validating the fact that no style is inherently better than another.

One practical way that you can do this is the following: When staff are generating very different kinds of ideas that potentially conflict with each other, ask a staff member to explain the rationale for an idea that has been posed by a colleague with a different cognitive style. That way, instead of a person defending their own idea, staff learn to appreciate the reasoning of others.

9. What is involved in using supervision well?

Much of the innovation literature, having originated in the United States, links success to an egalitarian, facilitative supervisory style in which employees are given maximum freedom to manage their own work lives. That literature does not recognize that these didactic statements are the assertion of a cultural norm. The strong history of innovation from economies like Japan and France, both of which have a more hierarchical cultural norm, makes it clear that innovation can flourish in a variety of organizational structures. For example, cultural assumptions that a supervisor is responsible for any failures of a subordinate provide that supervisor with a clear mandate for ensuring that subordinates have a low-risk environment for experimentation.

The following are examples of ways in which cultures differ that can affect the supervisory relationship:

- Who should be involved in decision-making
- The relative importance of consensus versus independent thinking
- How closely staff should be supervised
- How much unsanctioned experimentation is permissible
- Whether employees should put the company's welfare ahead of their own
- The relative importance of job security versus autonomy
- The relative importance of allowing others to "save face" publicly
- The relative value of group versus individual decisions
- How strictly rules should be kept
- The relative importance of time efficiency versus interpersonal relations
- The degree to which individuals are expected to conform to a group norm
- The role of tradition
- The relative importance of politeness and respect versus self-expression and creativity

10. How can I support staff in challenging the status quo?

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing you is how to encourage innovation in cultures where tradition is strongly valued and questioning past practices is discouraged. You will need to use techniques like referencing historical changes that are admired as being the "tradition" to follow, or providing practice in team processes for new idea generation as part of work expectations. Some of the innovation championing strategies that are likely to be useful include the following:

a) *Focus on experimentation within the group dynamic*

Especially in cultures that have a collective rather than individualistic focus, you can establish cross-functional teams and have members discuss both the benefits and drawbacks of innovation.

b) *Focus on managing the organizational structure (avoid uncertainty)*

In cultures high on avoiding uncertainty, you will need to be particularly careful to protect innovators from restrictions imposed by organizational policies and procedures.

c) *Focus on monitoring the innovation process*

In cultures where hierarchy and social status are important, you will need to elicit senior sponsorship for the innovation itself to keep it from being blocked prematurely by more senior members of the organizational hierarchy.