How the "Fear of Failure " is the Enemy of Innovation

Fear is the bitter enemy of innovation. Whether you are working in an enterprise or a start-up, fear can undermine your best efforts if you let it. This is especially true in large, process driven, bureaucratic organizations with hierarchical structures. Fear thrives in this type of environment – undermining attempts to change, adapt, innovate, or worse, masking it.

Let's begin with human nature. Human beings are innately fearful. It's part of our DNA and how we survived to get here. We're also fearful of how others perceive us. This is because we evolved as social creatures since our well-being was dependent on others in the tribe/group.

The prehistoric world was a harsh place filled with ferocious animals, hostile tribes, droughts, famine, and disease. Homo sapiens were more successful than other species because they learned how to cooperate and work as a group. If we upset our fellow sapiens, they kicked us out of the tribe, and our chances of survival plummeted since being expelled from the group was a virtual death sentence. Even if a tribal outcast managed to find a way to stay alive, it was nearly impossible to find a mate, so the DNA wouldn't pass on to the next generation. As a result, playing it safe and avoiding doing anything that may risk being in the group are traits reinforced through thousands of years of natural selection.

If you are going to meaningful innovate as a company (ie: be good a disruptive innovation), there is a need to overcome the notion of risk and this hard-coded fear. This is because innovating is the opposite of playing it safe. It's inherently risky, the stakes are high, and the process involves failure. To make matters worse, enterprises are usually structured hierarchically, with defined processes and rules, politics, rewards for success, punishments for failure, etc.

In all organizations, people want to take credit for good ideas, but nobody wants to be associated with bad ones. Because of this people would rather not innovate – unless they know it's going to work. This is problematic since if a project is new or has never been done before, it's impossible to know in advance if it will succeed. To get past this concern, look at it another way.

To better position enterprises to move forward, we can learn from how entrepreneurs, scientists and explorers view failure. They come up with a hypothesis, they run a series of tests, and if it doesn't work, they try again. If they threw up their hands and proclaimed themselves a failure the first time they hit a dead end, we'd have no new discoveries, science or businesses. Entrepreneurship, science and exploring is about look ahead as well as repeatedly trying and failing – until you get the desired outcome. There's no stigma attached to experiments that produce results that differ from the hypothesis. This is part of the process. In this world and the nature of innovation it's about seeking new opportunities, greater understanding and knowledge, continually create new hypothesis, test them out, learning and noting the results.

To be successful, it's not about the status quo, blocking change, protecting a reputation, etc. – it's about realizing potential, making good on opportunities, creating wealth, etc.

The problem is that most people in enterprises are not entrepreneurs, scientists or explorers. They care about adhering to processes, predictability, their reputation, likeability, etc. Further, in the enterprise, failure is looked down upon – especially the more potential the disruption. The logic goes that if you are involved in a failure, people will lose respect for you or not trust your judgement. As you well, you will lose status and influence and probably put your career opportunities in jeopardy. To avoid these issues, you have to have a track record of success. This is how you get – promoted , funding , ahead, opportunities , etc. Predictability is everything – and why enterprise environments tend to be toxic to disruptive.

With this and that fear of failure is part of our DNA, most people don't realize how if affects their thinking and behavior – they avoid something or someone they don't like !   Getting past this is a huge challenge – if the objective is to " Innovate for Impact " to meaningfully improve business outcomes. Fortunately, many people are creative in some form. In every enterprise, while numerous people are conservative and go along with the status quo, there are talented, creative people who have ideas and would like to innovate to make things better. But they frequently don't because of enterprise culture and structure whereby people tend to be punished for failure far more than they are rewarded for success. Any rational person in this environment sooner or later comes to realize that getting involved with a potential disruptive innovative project is a very risky career move. And hence the reason why meaningful innovation in enterprises is tough.

MYTH : IT PAYS TO GET IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

Many people think that it pays to get it right the first time. The problem is that teams that try to get it right the first time tend to focus on less risky, less innovative solutions. It makes sense because that's the only way to ensure they'll get it right. So if you don't want to innovate, try to get it right the first time.

Getting past the fear of failure is critical for an enterprise to have a future. If you don't remove the fear of failure, your company will be stuck with incremental innovation – where employees improve products and services rather than create entirely new ones. And/ or continuing with sustainable innovation to improve operational efficiencies and reduce costs.

Incremental and sustainable innovation are safe with relatively little risk. It is what enterprises have been doing for a long time and are good at. But incremental and sustainable innovation won't stave off a paradigm shift, make new markets, create new opportunities, etc. They're defensive moves to position an enterprise to retain market share, evolve the status quo, etc.

For a company to meaningfully increase relevance and revenue, invent new products / services, grow current markets, successfully enter new markets, leapfrog competitors, define new value, evolve their business model, etc. – the need is to be good at disruptive innovation – sooner than later.

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