

ENABLING LOCAL INVENTION

The most successful innovations are typically “demand-pull” in nature, driven by insights into what customers want. The people at the front lines of your business are most likely to have those insights. Many executives make the mistake of asking high-level executives to lead the innovation charge. But fueling local invention will have greater success.

Here are the lessons we’ve learned:

- Put together a small team of people who know your customers well and have shown an ability to think creatively. Isolate them from the “profit or loss” paradigm, at least in the short term. Members of the team should know they have sufficient money and time to develop ideas, test prototypes, and learn what scales to the level of a viable product or service, without worrying about making an immediate profit.
- Innovative ideas come from individuals. Teams need to be small enough to enable people with innovative ideas to test them without getting bogged down. A team with a strong hierarchy of command and control will be less innovative than one that is loosely structured.
- Give the team members access to smart people and advisors who can provide a sounding board and help clear away obstacles to their success. For example, at one of our client companies, the CEO designated a chief innovation officer to assure timely expenditures tied to innovation did not get bogged down in a bureaucratic approval process.
- Remember, by fueling local invention, you’re building a pipeline of new products and services. In some cases, the new ideas will cannibalize existing products. Make sure you clearly communicate the importance of innovation to the future of the company.
- As you tap local invention, you’re also building a bench of future leaders of your organization. Recognize them and reward them for their efforts. Give them the professional development they need. It will pay off in unexpected ways.

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