



Getting People to Believe in Something They Can't Yet Imagine

by Lee E. Miller and Kathleen Hayes Onieal | 1:00 PM October 10, 2014

What would you do if you had a working prototype of a revolutionary tablet computer that was receiving rave reviews well before Apple came out with its iPad? Cancel further funding for the project in favor of developing an updated version of an existing company product? In hindsight that seems crazy, but it's exactly what Microsoft did with its prototype "Courier" tablet.

Similar fates often befall innovations within large companies. It is not enough to come up with next great idea. To turn that idea into a reality you have to influence people and gain their support. You must do that in the face of vast forces arrayed against innovation within an established organization, which include inertia, resistance to change, fear of failure, financial disincentives, and the tendency of people and organizations to favor what has worked in the past. Then there's what might be the biggest hurdle of all, people's inability to envision something that is truly different.

Gaining support for an idea for which people have no point of reference is a huge challenge for innovators. It is hard to win over someone who cannot see what you see. Traditional influencing theory — as expounded, for example, by Robert Cialdini (<http://ffbsccn.wordpress.com/2014/02/14/robert-cialdini-on-the-six-principles-of-influence/>) in *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (<http://www.amazon.com/Influence-Psychology-Persuasion-Revised-Edition/dp/006124189X>) — offers "invoking authority" as a way to persuade others to support things that are new to them. If you are a recognized expert in the field, your audience may trust that you know what you are talking about even if they don't exactly understand it themselves. Often, however, truly groundbreaking innovation comes from people that do not yet have a track record of success. What then?

We have been conducting a series of interviews with individuals who have successfully championed innovation in large organizations and traditional settings, overcoming resistance and inertia within those organizations, in order to identify the commonalities in their efforts. Our research suggests that these influencing approaches offer innovators a possibility of success:

UNDER THE RADAR: Incremental improvement which can be readily understood is not considered nearly as threatening as groundbreaking innovation. So in some cases the best course of action is to present what you're doing as simply building on current practice, keeping the truly innovative aspects hidden under the radar until it is so far along, and showing sufficient promise, as to make it impossible to shut down. George Petsching, who led the incubation of the Courier tablet at Microsoft, told us that he attributes its demise to the research team's product plans being "leaked" to the media. That gave the project a much higher profile, leading many at Microsoft to try to become part of it — which may have played into then CEO Steve Ballmer's decision to abandon the project in favor of devoting resources to improving existing product lines. It hadn't stayed under the radar.

When Instinet launched the first electronic trading system for automated buying and selling of securities in 1983 it introduced the system to brokers and exchanges as an incremental improvement rather than as the transformative innovation that it turned out to be, former Executive Vice President David Manns told us. Manns described the approach as “getting to breakthrough innovation indirectly by letting the end users get comfortable incrementally until you have achieved a critical mass that cannot be reversed.”

DEMONSTRATION: It is difficult for people who have never experienced the benefits of a particular innovation to recognize its value. That is why a demonstration can have a far greater impact in terms of gaining support than data or studies showing why the innovation makes sense. Gary Starkweather, the inventor of the Xerox 9700, the high-speed laser printer that revolutionized the printing industry, initially had to work on it his spare time behind a black curtain because his superiors thought it was a silly idea. After he threatened to leave for IBM, Starkweather was transferred to Xerox’s newly opened Palo Alto Research Center, where he did get the resources to build a prototype. But Xerox management remained skeptical — it was only after Starkweather was able to demonstrate the superiority of his prototype in a competition pitting it against incremental product innovations that management thought were more promising that he began to break through the resistance.

PILOT PROJECT: Another of the major methods of persuasion outlined by Robert Cialdini is the “principle of consistency.” That is, once we have taken an action, we experience personal and social pressure to behave consistently with it. Those pressures will cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision. This principle can be applied to gain support for an innovative idea. When additional support or resources are needed to develop your innovation, and simply keeping your work under the radar will not suffice, proposing an innovation as research or as a pilot project that does not require a major commitment can garner support. Once managers have committed to the research or pilot project, it becomes difficult for them not to support the implementation that naturally follows from its success.

For example, after demonstrating that his high-speed laser printer prototype outperformed the alternatives, Starkweather still faced internal resistance in bringing it to market. He and his boss came up with the idea of grafting lasers onto older, excess inventory printers, turning them into working laser printers at minimal cost, and offering them for free to several good customers to test. The response to these first laser printers was overwhelmingly positive, spawning a multi-billion dollar business for Xerox.

INEVITABILITY: When an industry is changing rapidly, it opens the door to obtaining support for an innovative idea that, in a more stable business environment, management might not consider. Particularly when coupled with one of the above techniques, such as under the radar or the pilot project, it can be effective to argue that since change is inevitable the organization ought to get ahead of it. The choice then becomes either support the proposal now and exert control over how the business evolves, or be forced to accept changes later on others’ terms.

Colin Foster described to us how, in 2008, when he was the head of online and internal communications at drug-maker Novartis, he was able to overcome strong resistance to employing social media to engage customers. The company’s lawyers and its top management, to the extent they understood social media, opposed its use because of their inability to control the content. So Foster arranged a meeting with the company’s president, bringing along an expert from IBM to explain social media. At the start of the meeting Foster opened his computer and typed “Novartis” into a Twitter search, stating “We’ll get back to this later.” About an hour later, as the meeting was ending, Foster turned back to his computer. Over 600 tweets mentioning Novartis had been generated, all without any participation from the company. The president seemed to suddenly recognize that the company was going to be the subject of social media conversation regardless of what it did, and directed Foster to form a high-level team to examine how the company should use social media.

The more successful an organization, the more likely it will continue to do what has made it successful in the past and resist breakthrough innovations. Leaders can, and often do, try to make corporate cultures more receptive to innovation. However, providing innovators with the influencing tools needed to gain support for their ideas within the prevailing corporate culture, whatever that culture may be, will likely have a greater impact.