Innovation: Turning stumbling blocks into learning blocks

Innovation research shows that companies are struggling to be innovative despite knowing it is vital to their survival. While some question whether the will to innovate truly exists - others say adults need to be taught to p[lay] and think creatively again.

By Rob Kellas , issued by Hasso Plattner d-school Afrika 22 May 2017

Consulting firm PA Consulting in a new report, Innovation Matters, surveyed more than 800 senior executives around the world and found that while over 60% believed that innovation was crucial to survival, only 24% believed they had defined th[e] skills and activities needed to be innovative. About 50% did not think their leaders had the ability to be innovative.

The report states, "Despite a year full of societal, business and technological changes that offer even greater opportunities for fresh innovation, this year's research confirms the skills and will to innovate have not yet improved in most organisation[s]

Demystifying innovation

Why is innovation such a slippery fish to catch? It is our fear of failure that is holding us back. There have been numerous studies showing how effective we are at keeping ourselves from succeeding in creative fields. And this extremely debilitati[ng] trait is something we develop as we become adults. Small children are far less worried about failing or what others will thin[k] of their creative efforts. They are more willing to explore and fail at things and spend less time thinking about setbacks.

This is famously illustrated by US thought leader, Tom Wujec, by way of the marshmallow challenge. In this exercise team[s] are given 18 minutes to build a tower out of spaghetti sticks, masking tape, rope and one marshmallow. After having sever[al] teams perform the test, he was surprised to find that kindergarten children were able to build higher and more interesting towers than recent business school graduates.

A creative environment

In Wujec's experiment business school graduates had been "taught" to find a single "right" solution and this limited their creativity in execution. The students built with the spaghetti sticks and only added the marshmallow at the last moment, whi[ch] often causes the whole structure to collapse. On the other hand, kindergartners who have less rigid frames, built prototype[s] starting with the marshmallow, changing their designs as they went along. The process was less stressful, more collaborati[ve] and resulted in better outcomes. Design thinkers call this the essence of the iterative process – the act of trial and error, learning from your mistakes to find better outcomes.

Design thinking expert and IDEO CEO, Tim Brown, says adults often apologise for their efforts in creative exercises, as th are driven largely by fear of judgement from their peers. "This fear leads us to be conservative in our thinking."

How we configure our working spaces and interactions encourages this kind of thinking. Planning sessions and strategy meetings take place around tables with perhaps a pencil and a piece of paper as the only extra tools. People are given tur to present their opinions and are judged according to the merits of the speaker's argument.

By contrast, stepping into the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design Thinking at the UCT Graduate School of Business (d-school), you are met not by the formal structures of a lecture hall or boardroom, but an open space with brightly coloured walls full of post-it notes and hand-written phrases. The furniture is on wheels and is frequently moved around. Flexibility ir the physical space encourages engagement around a focus point, shifting to the needs of the team. Meeting in these space promotes active participation and building on one another's ideas. The transformation in the physical space mirrors what i going on cognitively in the minds of the participants, as walls are constantly being tested and shifted; a reframing of perspectives and understanding.

Many South African businesses have cottoned on to the benefits of this creative approach to innovation. Rather than mere reacting to external factors, organisations want to actively create a future in which they are relevant. As Africa's first desig thinking school, the d-school has been working with organisations to prepare for a different way of operating and to help them better understand the needs of their users.

A culture of innovation

The concept of a culture where innovation thrives is one where there is less focus on rules and rigid structures, and more emphasis on flexibility and openness in terms of thinking and suggestions. Participants on design thinking courses are encouraged to try and fail, to voice their opinions as well as to learn how to listen and talk to others. They are guided to becoming more attuned to the user experience and the way customers and clients use products or services. This is quintessential to finding innovative improvements to a process or product.

This is where the magic happens. Innovation may result in a positive outcome - but too many neglect to mention the hard work and the frequent failures that led to that outcome. Look at Thomas Edison, the Wright Brothers, James Dyson - thes were innovators who were not scared of failing, they were relentlessly iterative and built prototypes as learning experiment

Innovation may not be easy, but it is not nearly as hard as people think it is.

Rob Kellas is the convenor of the open course: Design Thinking in Practice, offered in conjunction with the Hasso Platt Institute of Design Thinking (d-school) situated on the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) campus in the Waterfront.

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