INNOVATION LEADERSHIP

It's time to break out of your innovation ghetto. **Bert De Coutere** and **David Magellan Horth** lead the way

H ere's the thing with innovation: we disappoint ourselves comparing it to our great expectations. When asked how important innovation is, 94 per cent of a Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) panel of global executives said it is *important* to *very important*.

When asked how effective their organisation is at innovating, the answer dropped to 14 per cent. That's a wide gap, but it also opened up an opportunity.

It's not that our organisations are not getting results from their innovation initiatives, or that we haven't been trying to up our game: the problem is we expect much more. To get closer to the 94 per cent, we need to go beyond

what we are doing today. In this article we'll discuss how to go beyond words, beyond 'but', beyond ideas, beyond the ghetto and beyond the hero.

Beyond words
Agree what innovation means to your organisation and what you want from it
A favourite thing to do when visiting a new client is to walk the corridors and ask people: 'what is innovation to you?' The answers indicate whether 'innovation' is one
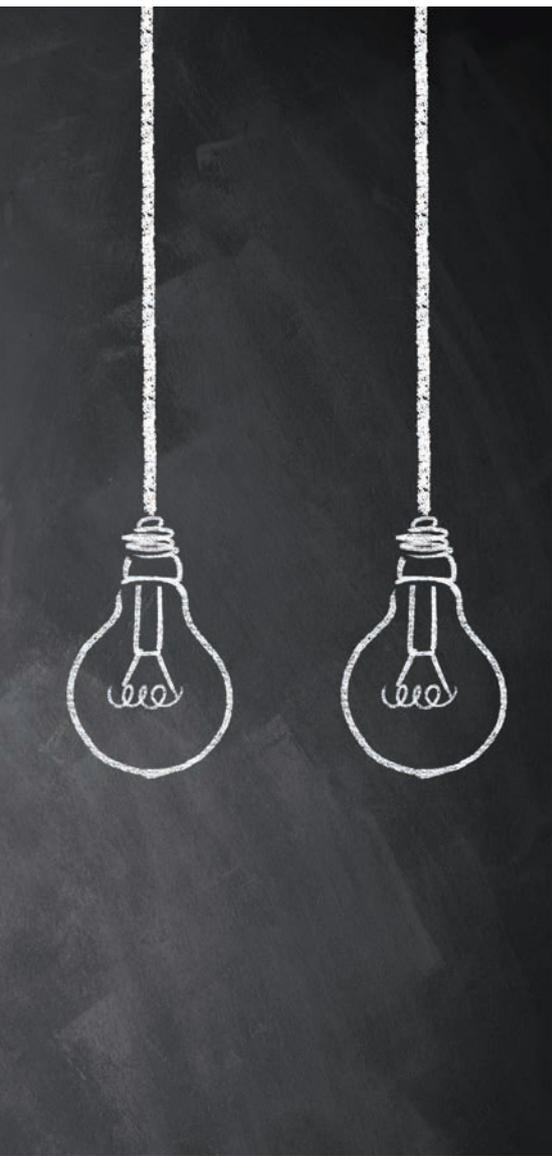
of those fashionable 'words on the wall' that might mean anything to anybody or whether there is an aligned understanding on what it means and why it is important for the company.

CCL research on companies who are effective at innovating reveals they have a vision for innovation *and* an innovation strategy that links up with the overall business strategy. If innovation is indeed so important, it deserves clarity.

You'll find many definitions of innovation, and they all have similar elements. We define innovation as: creating and implementing something new that adds value.

It all starts by sharing a common understanding of why innovation matters to the organisation and to us. A lot of the time, people phrase that as fear: fear of upcoming (digital) disruption, fear of what competition

is doing, fear of being perceived as not progressing, and so on.

Another element that comes up in these clarification conversations refers to what we call the 'volution spectrum': how much 'evolutionary' and/or 'revolutionary' innovation does your business context and strategy require? Then have a discussion on how much of the innovation budget goes to each end of the spectrum, and how much that ideally should be.

A third element of clarification is around the nature of the innovation. All too often we focus on product and service performance, whereas there are many more innovation types, such as business model, company configuration, brand and customer experience.

Beyond 'but'
See the value in all ideas
Think back to the last time you brought an idea to your manager, or the last time someone else brought an idea to you. How did the conversation go? How do managers typically respond when someone brings a new idea?

The way in which we answer and the words we use matter greatly. 'Yes, but' is one of the most popular replies. That's unfortunate because it demotivates people who got energised about innovation and the last thing we want is for people to stop bringing ideas. A simple reframing of the answer and switching from 'Yes, but' to 'Yes, and' changes the dynamics of the conversation to a common exploration of the value of the idea while building on it, instead of killing it instantly.

Research shows that one of the reasons managers inadvertently kill ideas is that they use *feasibility* as the prime criteria to evaluate ideas, whereas customers are looking for *creativity*. Inside most organisations, managers are conditioned to focus on what is feasible instead of what might be possible.

Learn this: POINt tool for evaluating ideas
The POINt tool helps to evaluate ideas starting with the positive. We can testify that this simple tool has helped to unstick conversations, so give it a try:

▸ **Pluses** – what's good about the idea now that we should keep?
▸ **Opportunities** – what might be good in the future?

▸ **Issues** – what's not right yet? Phrase the issues as:
 · How to …?
 · How might we …?
 · In what ways might we …?
▸ **New thinking** – to overcome the issues.

Beyond creativity
Ideas don't sell themselves and don't implement themselves
During one of our first innovation workshops, executives came to us saying 'ideas are not the problem, I get good ideas on a daily basis'. CCL research confirms this: a lack of ideas didn't make it into the top five of

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Switching from 'Yes, but' to 'Yes, and' changes the dynamics of the conversation

innovation roadblocks. But it's not OK when brainstorming sessions only deliver a wall full of Post-its, or a hackathon session only produces a prototype.

Is idea generation important? Absolutely. Is it sufficient? Absolutely not. Ideas don't just sell and implement themselves: they need active support and hard work from managers at all levels. We need to go beyond creativity and teach people how to navigate ideas safely through a complex organisation.

Championing ideas requires empathy with those you want to get on board to convey the value to them. It's all about the compelling story. The crux of the problem is that managers are faced with pressure of implementing the organisation's strategy and doing today's business. They don't have time to listen to nebulous explanations. If the person presenting the idea can't connect the proposed innovation to results or give a roadmap to take the idea to the marketplace, the manager tunes out.

Beyond ghettos
Connect ideas to ideas, ideas to people and people to people
We bet that the innovation you are working on requires collaboration across the enterprise, and maybe even →

beyond that. Successful implementation of ideas requires us to get out of The Ghetto, and work together across silos, or 'islands of expertise'.

Some companies have implemented The Ghetto: they've set up an innovation lab in a dedicated building, usually full of bean bags, toys and creative people. The positive of that is it frees people from the demands of the daily business to dedicate themselves to an innovation challenge. The opportunity is that by

Behind every great innovator is a great innovation network

bringing a critical mass of innovators together we can accelerate the process.

However, one of the main issues is that by saying that innovation is happening in The Ghetto, you're giving the message that it doesn't need to happen in the rest of the organisation. The Ghetto needs to be connected with the rest of the business.

Even without The Ghetto, managers need to connect across many different boundaries inside the organisation to get from 'idea' to 'implemented value'. Middle managers are uniquely positioned to help do this. When one of us took on a role that had the word 'innovation' in it, it helped him to see his responsibilities as *'connecting ideas to ideas, ideas to people and people to people'*.

Learn this: boundary spanning
Managers indicate that collaboration across business units is the most important boundary to span when it comes to innovation, and there can also be important hierarchical, stakeholder, geographical and demographic divides. CCL research recommends a process to collaborate across these organisational boundaries:
- **Create safety** – by defining roles and responsibilities.
- **Create respect** – by representing perspectives of the other group.
- **Create trust** – by connecting with colleagues from the other group on a personal level.
- **Create a community** – by working on a shared innovation mission.

Beyond heroes
Innovation is a team sport
Both leadership and innovation suffer from the hero cult. In fact, behind every great innovator is a great innovation network. Thomas Edison didn't invent all by himself – nor did any of the great innovation heroes for that matter.

Here's a question for you: if you were to give out a reward for a successful innovation, who would you give it to? The person with the original idea, the people who clarified the business need and market potential, the people who thought the concept completely through end-to-end or the people who scaled it up and rolled it out?

A lot needs to happen before an idea is transferred into implemented value – and this explains why it's a team sport. CCL's Targeted Innovation Process distinguishes four parts:
- **Clarifying** the challenge we are trying to solve.
- **Ideating** to generate the idea(s) to solve this challenge.
- **Developing** the idea into a proven solution.
- **Implementing** and scaling up the solution.

An interesting research finding by Gerard Puccio is that people tend to have preferences for certain parts of the innovation process. This highlights the need to abandon the idea that innovation is done by a single hero, as all parts are equally important.

In all the innovation workshops we have delivered, the group preference around 'develop' has been the weakest one. That may indicate a self-selecting audience who goes to innovation workshops or who work on innovation projects or live in the innovation ghettos. We think it actually indicates a blind spot in the whole innovation process.

Equally, in most of the innovation workshops we facilitated, the strongest group preference was 'ideating'. That may partly explain why people in innovation roles want so much focus
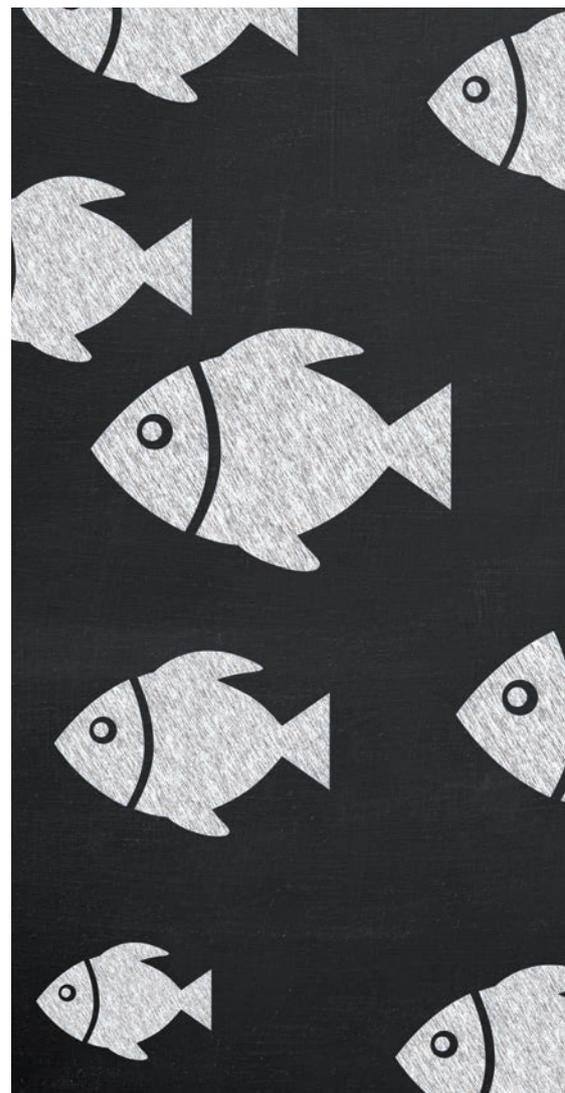
on the creativity part of innovation. But once again: if you care about getting results through innovation, you need to care about all phases.

We often get the question about what the ideal network for innovation looks like. Is it, for example, a closed network (where most people know and communicate with each other) or an open network (where a person is connected with individuals who are not connected to each other), or a diverse network (an open network where you broker between different disjointed groups)? Is it a collection of superficial ties (casual relations) or strong ties (people you have deep professional relationships with)? The answer is: it depends.

The effectiveness of our network depends on the phase of the innovation process. Weak ties and an open network will serve us well in the clarification and ideation phases. When it comes to implementation, we need

to rely on strong and deep relationships in our core operational network. Successful innovation leaders are able to oscillate between these two types.

'The paradox inherent in the innovation process is that innovators need wide-ranging ties across distant worlds to generate the innovative ideas in the first place, yet they also need strong, focused ties to build communities around emerging innovations.'
How Breakthroughs Happen by Andrew Hargadon

The effectiveness of our network depends also on the type of innovation on the 'volution spectrum'. Incremental or evolutionary innovation works well in the context of a close, dense network where most people know each other. However, when we need the outside perspective away from groupthink for a breakthrough or revolutionary innovation, we'll want to tap into an open and diverse network.

Learn this: map your innovation network
Map out the people in your network who are important to your innovation challenge. Now reflect on:
▸ who helps you discover wicked problems? (Target)
▸ who helps you focus on key problems and see them differently? (Clarify)
▸ from whom do you get inspiration and ideas? (Ideate)
▸ who helps you flesh out and prove your concepts? (Develop)
▸ who helps you roll out and scale up? (Implement)

In summary
To help us deliver on the great expectations we have of innovation, we need to move beyond standard practices and approaches to innovation. We must move:
▸ beyond a blurry notion of innovation and a focus on mostly product and service innovation
▸ beyond killing ideas because we focus too much on feasibility or are not engaged in conversations to explore the value of ideas
▸ beyond the creativity aspect of innovation alone and supporting people to navigate an idea through a complex organisation
▸ beyond innovation ghettos towards a collaboration across the extended enterprise
▸ beyond innovation heroes and towards leveraging entire innovation networks.

The expectations we have for innovation are great, and they are in reach if we can learn to lead change along with developing ideas. **TJ**

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