Launch your employees on an Idea Quest

Good things happen when companies view employees as active advocates and participants of change programs—and not merely as the target of changes delivered from "on high."

Imagine an organization where people are productive, efficient, and creative. Where they are empowered to share bold ideas, solve problems, and explore opportunities. Where they actively contribute to decision making and feel like owners of the organization's mission. Sound like a fantasy? Perhaps. But it's not out of reach.

This description doesn't capture the state of affairs at most organizations, where employees often feel left out of strategic decisions and overlooked in the shaping and planning of initiatives once a decision is made to pursue them. When I set out to write *The Q-Loop*, my goal was to enable organizations to passionately embrace change and to implement it swiftly and efficiently. Fundamental to this book is my unwavering belief that for widespread acceptance and adoption of a change initiative to occur, those living the change on a daily basis must fundamentally believe in it—and to believe in it, they must contribute by helping to shape it.

Over the years I've learned that the key to unlocking an organization's ability to produce lasting change is to use the knowledge already present within its staff. Frontline employees—the service agents on the phone with customers, the healthcare professionals interacting with patients, the cashiers, the salespeople, the delivery drivers—are too often overlooked or not given a voice within an organization. Yet this group is closest to customers and to the products and services you offer. Without them, a change initiative doesn't stand a chance.

Your assistant, junior associate, bank teller, barista, pizza maker, custodian, or forklift operator might have answers to your organization's most pressing issues or fixes for time-wasting problems. These colleagues might have ideas for new ways to satisfy the customer or insight into how to tweak a corporate mandate so that this time it will actually be embraced by the rest of the organization. But most organizations won't benefit from this valuable knowledge, because management doesn't invite meaningful, focused input and collaboration from frontline employees. Instead, leaders look elsewhere to unearth more innovative ways of doing things, when the answer is actually right under their noses. The challenge is to focus your employees' combined brainpower by asking smart questions and facilitating the flow of information along fruitful paths to solve problems and discover opportunities (for more, see sidebar, "Inside The Corporate Lab").

Embracing frontline employees as the real experts

Frontline workers see many problems and opportunities that their managers don't. Depending on the position, frontline employees gather knowledge from perhaps hundreds of interactions a day. Organizations have a tremendous opportunity to pull this knowledge from employees' day-to-day experiences and use it to make decisions—which are acted upon by those same employees.

Interestingly, a win-win situation arises when companies look to their employees for ideas and when employees are asked to help shape management ideas and mandates.

Companies with high-performing idea-generation systems report that roughly 80% of overall performance improvements come from frontline employees throughout the organization, while only 20% come from management-initiated projects. Considering those facts, it's eye-opening that most of the organizations largely ignore the enormous resource of employee ideas. Either many leaders don't realize the power of employee ideas, or they never learned how to systematically capture and channel this wealth of insight to support the decisions made within their organizations.

Without the passionate engagement of your front line, you will be at a severe disadvantage. Tap into this powerhouse of great ideas, on the other hand, and you will unlock a vast, formidable, and renewable resource. That's because when

Inside The Corporate Lab

To achieve success, an organization must build a transformation program that will allow change to be rapidly implemented across its departments and throughout its layers. Unless key employees at all levels embrace the change, the initiative will die on the vine. To create this kind of widespread passion, the workforce must be exposed to a vision of *what could be*, which will enable it to rethink mental models and break free from entrenched thinking.

To address the question of what could be, I developed The Corporate Lab®. It aims to establish a flexible, scalable, reality-based platform that can build clients' capabilities in a number of areas. The goal is to offer a transformative—not merely educational—experience and to show participants how to recognize obstacles to success within their own organization and how to overcome them. The Corporate Lab immerses participants in an environment that precisely mirrors their day-to-day workplace in terms of culture and behavior, so that they can see how they typically behave. The Corporate Lab incorporates design thinking as well as organizational-agility approaches.

The basic philosophy of The Corporate Lab is to weave together traditional problem solving, in the form of the scientific method, and a strong constructionist element. The scientific method challenges you to make an observation, ask a question, form a hypothesis, conduct an experiment, and then accept or reject your hypothesis. This method is the backbone of the approach employed by The Corporate Lab. But it is not enough to generate the behavioral change that is crucial for participants to experience the "art of the possible." Therefore, The Corporate Lab therefore employs a heavy dose of constructionism, a learning theory developed by Seymour Papert of the MIT Media Lab. It holds that students learn best when making sense of something on their own, with the teacher as a guide to help them along the way.

The Corporate Lab was built to absorb the cultural norms of the client organization. This familiarity encourages participants to reframe their mind-sets by allowing them to view, through a very different lens, the same information that they have seen countless times. This shift enables them to recalibrate their perspective and become open to change.

frontline employees see strategies and decisions that result from their own input, they are substantially more engaged in making them successful.

A brief explanation of "collective IQ"

Assume for a moment that an organization has 1,000 workers who have an average IQ of 110. The organization then has 110,000 IQ points available as a resource. What percentage of this collective IQ effectively participates in market sensing and decision making? In most organizations, it's safe to assume very little.

Clearly, not every brain within the organization has the same responsibility for decision making. Senior managers, after all, were promoted or hired for a reason. Also, it's impractical to create an environment where all brains have equal relevance across the totality of decisions a company makes.

In many organizations, however, decision making is concentrated in the hands of the people in corporate headquarters who are furthest away from the market. To gain a competitive edge from your company's untapped potential, you must cultivate a culture in which staff at all levels can easily share solutions for improving the business. Empowered employees, after all, are more innovative and engaged because they have more of an emotional stake in the organization's overall success. When it comes to ideas, the biggest roadblock senior management often faces is the widespread, deeply entrenched belief that ideas from the rank and file don't matter. Where did employees get this idea? In many company cultures, this wellspring of valuable insight simply is not encouraged, considered, or rewarded. Creating an infrastructure that supports idea generation and a more collaborative mind-set will help frontline workers become

passionately engaged with your company's ongoing strategy of improvement.

Introducing Idea Quest

There are software products that try to address the problems inherent in the traditional suggestion box, such as vetting bad and redundant ideas. They may improve the process but don't replace it. Instead, I have developed an approach that can be used in connection with other idea-generating processes to solicit more fruitful, strategic, and relevant ideas from the collective intelligence within your organization. I call it Idea Quest.

Idea Quest introduces a formal, disciplined process into what is often a helter-skelter approach. That way, you reduce redundancy and rework by providing transparency. The process sharply improves organizational focus by recognizing an opportunity and by quickly identifying the best ideas so you can allocate resources effectively. It also increases the odds that the most promising ideas receive attention and the resources needed to implement them. Finally, Idea Quest helps you evaluate the effectiveness of the ideation process based on the number of ideas per employee or team, participation percentage, time spent on ideation, and the number of cross-functional ideas submitted.

Let's consider the five steps of an effective Idea Quest in more detail.

1. Focus employees on a specific mandate

While open-ended innovation has its value, the most successful systems for ideation within an organization define focused business challenges to encourage employees to solve specific problems quickly. To execute this approach, invite the appropriate employees and employee groups to generate ideas to address a specific business opportunity

within a defined time frame. The invitation questions should look at a single opportunity and should be short and focused.

IBM uses this approach successfully, having launched an initiative in 2001 that it calls Innovation Jams. These online brainstorming and collaboration sessions are designed to spark innovation on specific topics. By 2006, just five years after the program's launch, $100 million was granted to the top ideas generated by more than 150,000 IBM employees, family members, business partners, clients, and university researchers.

2. Engage employees in meaningful ways

Use multiple mechanisms to motivate employees to become involved in your Idea Quest. Successful methods include the following:

- Setting a good example by having management participate in contributing ideas
- Stressing the importance of creativity
- Ensuring that all employees know that you want to hear ideas from them

- Making sure that contributors share in the success of the result
- Encouraging all ideas through positive feedback
- Making it fun

When I worked with Corning Consumer Products Company (now known as World Kitchen) a number of years ago, I engaged company employees on a vexing issue. At the time, the company was trying to develop innovative new uses for CorningWare. One of the primary reasons for the company's goal was that it needed to defray the enormous fixed cost tied up in its Pyroceram glass operation. The most difficult part of the challenge was, paradoxically, CorningWare's tremendous success: it enjoyed 98% brand awareness among female consumers and had 82% household penetration. I understood that the best way to solve the problem was to use company employees' collective IQ.

A directive was given to the company's employees who were female and members of a racial or ethnic minority—from store cashiers to corporate executives—to consider how to make CorningWare products more attractive to underserved,

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high-growth-potential minority consumers (data revealed that female, ethnic-minority customers spent more, on average, for cookware than did other groups). We used the engagement methods previously listed and were overwhelmed by the great response. Our Idea Quest resulted in profitable cookware designed to meet the unique needs of minority cooks, including rice warmers, paella pots, and large bowls for soup.

3. Create an easy and transparent way to share ideas

Idea Quest participants should work independently or together in meaningful groups to develop ideas over two to four weeks. The environment should be transparent to participants so everyone can see ideas that are being formulated as well as all submitted ideas, which individuals and teams can then build on.

To facilitate the process, executives should assemble people who do not normally work together. This approach creates a dynamic that can spark unexpected ideas. Also, executives should encourage employees to join teams in other departments to offer an outside perspective. They should urge people to think differently and to evaluate the issue from nontraditional perspectives. Finally, executives should try to create a safe environment in which people don't feel they have to ask for forgiveness if their ideas don't work out.

Remember that creativity should always be rewarded, even if the idea does not wind up being used. Be sure that valuable ideas are implemented—publicize the process, the contributors, and the results to encourage future participation.

4. Require that ideas be turned into a project plan

Without a workable written project plan, submitted ideas can be abstract and hard to evaluate. An idea

might seem sound, but dig a little deeper and the shaky foundation is revealed. Requiring that ideas be presented as a simplified project plan means weak projects must be strengthened to pass muster. Or, plans can be identified as weak more quickly and scrapped so that the stronger ideas can move forward. While a project plan doesn't need to be a 50-slide PowerPoint, important issues concerning competition, uniqueness, and viability should be considered and documented.

5. Evaluate each idea and respond promptly

When ideas disappear into a black hole, contributors become discouraged. Allocating adequate resources for evaluation of generated ideas is important. An additional advantage of creating a transparent process is that redundant ideas can be culled or combined to reduce effort.

Idea Quest in action

Amazon used the basic Idea Quest process when it created its Prime service, though the company didn't call the process by that name. In early 2005 Amazon introduced Prime, which has been a huge success. After signing up for the service, Prime members significantly increase their purchases on the site, and the program may be responsible for a robust share of US Amazon sales.

Prime was no accidental discovery. Instead, it was a result of the company employing the full capacity of its collective IQ through an approach similar to the Idea Quest process. Let me explain.

To begin, Amazon focused employees on a specific mandate. For several years, Amazon was searching for the right loyalty program. The company decided to ask employees to contribute ideas for such a program. The specific mandate was to create an effective loyalty program that would grow sales and increase customer retention.

Creativity and inventiveness have long been part of Amazon's culture. There were past examples of employees' ideas being implemented, so they felt that their ideas were valued. Over the years, the company created a positive and transparent environment. An internal website was in place to capture many employee ideas.

The company engaged its employees in a meaningful way. Employees knew that this particular mandate was an important one because it came from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos. While the company could have had a traditional loyalty program up and running in no time, employees knew that the company was looking for something truly groundbreaking, which energized them.

As a result, an Amazon software engineer named Charlie Ward suggested the idea of a free shipping service, which was applauded. Yet, through further consideration and analysis, company executives, including Bezos, transformed the idea into a flat-fee subscription service that included free two-day shipping, improving the original idea substantially from Amazon's point of view.[1]

Finally, Amazon responded quickly to the idea. The pace from original suggestion to launch was brisk. Bezos commissioned Prime at an unconventional Saturday meeting in the boathouse behind his home, telling a small team of employees that they should marshal company engineers and resources to get Prime ready for the company's fourth-quarter earnings report less than two months away.

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Using your organization's collective IQ is the most powerful force for real innovation. Fully engaging your employees makes them more open to all change initiatives. Identifying your company's real experts—especially on the front line—is a fundamental step to tapping your organization's collective IQ in a thoughtful and focused way. ■

[1] Brad Stone, "What's in Amazon's box? Instant gratification," Bloomberg, November 24, 2010, bloomberg.com.

About the author

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