

Corporate diamonds in the rough: encouraging entrepreneurship within your organisation

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Entrepreneurship is not just for business owners. Increasingly, a new crop of ambitious employees are seeking to transform their organisations by using risk-taking and innovation approaches to improve organisational profitability, renew existing business operations and improve competitive positioning. Corporate entrepreneurs, or 'intrapreneurs', are highly valuable employees and managers who possess an entrepreneurial spirit, and they are willing to undertake new projects without being asked. This week, innovation expert Rikus Grober shares some insights on how to engage the entrepreneurs in the workplace. Grobler also teaches the HP-GSB master's degree module on Entrepreneurship and Innovation.



Rikus Grobler

HP-GSB: How do employers spot and keep intrapreneurs?

Rikus Grobler (RG): These individuals are often perceived as going against the mainstream, challenging existing practices and wanting to shake up things. These are people who make other people in the organisation feel uneasy. Uneasy in terms of wanting to be change agents and invoke change for the better. Based on my experience, the organisation and its leadership have to be very mature to really fully utilise these employees. Large and established organisations exist to maintain the status quo, drive efficiencies, and have rules and regulations in place to do just that. In order to embrace corporate entrepreneurs, you have to give them space to do and be what they want to, but within the boundaries of the organisation's rules. For example, if they

bring an idea to the table, don't write it off as preposterous; hear them out, give them a chance to explain themselves, or give them a bit of budget and ask for a proof of concept. Give them some freedom to go and explore their ideas and the things they want to change. It is not always a new product or service, sometimes it's something internal that can bring about new efficiencies, or a way of removing bureaucracy that can make things happen quicker. Give them some leeway but be very explicit and say that while you are going to allow this, you want to

see the benefits as well. Give them some goals to direct their energy towards. It can be difficult for employers, because you don't want it to appear that there is a different set of rules for corporate entrepreneurs, or that they are treated as 'special'. There is a fine line between allowing these ideas and causing an upstir in the rest of the organisation.

HP-GSB: What process should organisations use for handling new ideas in the organisation?

RG: In a large organisation where decision making may not be as quick because it requires the input of a lot of people, it is just not always structured to accept creative ideas. I strongly feel that for a large organisation to innovate, you need established processes in place where ideas can be submitted and taken further. The first thing you need to consider is how people can focus their creative ideas on the organisation's needs. Is it known within the organisation that, for example, you are struggling with an issue such as service complaints or advancing competition? You can put the issues to the team and ask them to apply their creative thinking to solve the problems. There are many ways in which you can do that, such as running idea campaigns, innovation competitions, or even just in staff meetings you can have a specific agenda point dedicated to issues and possible solutions. Then the other thing to consider is the actual process of submitting an idea. Is there a form that you fill in? Is it emailed to your manager? Is there a place where these idea campaigns are set up where people can go and submit their ideas? The

crux is that if I have an idea, I need to know what to do with it.

HP-GSB: How does management go about providing feedback to each submitted idea?

RG: People become very discouraged if they don't get feedback on their ideas, so you must have some form of criteria to evaluate ideas to give the person feedback. Criteria can be simple: is the idea feasible, attractive or novel for instance. Or it can be aligned to the company's strategic themes. Feedback can be simple and to the point: "we received your idea and will revert to you in two weeks"; "we think this is a great idea, come in and see us tomorrow"; or "this idea will have to be parked for now for these reasons, but please feel free to come back with more ideas." Don't just keep silent on the issue. Middle managers also need to be trained on how to deal with staff's ideas, because they are in many cases the first line of bureaucracy where these ideas get submitted. Train your middle managers on how to be idea receivers; how to properly hear the idea out, how to give the person feedback, what questions to ask, and not just shoot down the idea. It has to do with process and organisational culture. Sometimes the risk is that the manager wants to be seen as having the good idea, and will crush an idea because it might make him or her look bad because they didn't come up with the idea.

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