
Learn from Peter Mulford, BTS Sharing a View on Innovation.

Peter Mulford does not underestimate the potential of innovation within the workplace today. Implementing innovative tactics is work that is counter intuitive to our classic business models. This makes it a challenge, but clearly a worthwhile skill to develop. With practice and support, fostering innovation can become a privileged point for competitive advantage.

I met Peter over a year ago and every time we talk, he has me realizing that I have a greater capacity for “ideation” than I imagined. We were lucky to capture him for this interview last month, following a long term assignment in Asia, helping senior managers of a Fortune 50 company transform culture.



Only recently has innovation become a top concern for CEO’s today and Peter Mulford, Executive Vice President and Head of Strategic Alignment and Business Acumen at [BTS](#), passionately believes in the benefits that fostering such skill can have across diverse companies.

Sherry Benjamins: What do we mean by innovation in the workplace today?

Peter Mulford: To think and work innovatively is to enthusiastically propose many ideas and solutions, unhindered by safe convention. Innovation is about selection through “expansion and multiplication, and the crazier the multiplication, the better!”

There exist several misunderstandings about innovation in the workplace. Many assume it is a skill shrouded in mystery and cannot be taught. One either has it, or they don’t. And with such unfortunate assumption comes the call for “creative” experts to come in with their “black turtlenecks and bouncy balls” that will innovate for you. Innovation can be taught! The mystique in part results from the call for a new set of skills that challenge classic business models in which inductive, deductive and analytic reasoning are stressed.

SB: What is the role of HR in building an innovative culture?

PM: The HR community plays a critical role in helping to implement innovation. The challenges have not as much to do with creativity or resources, but entirely with management capability. Never before has there been such an important moment for the HR community to function as “stewards of human capacity for action”, understanding and implementing the inner architecture of innovation and fostering it as human capital. Innovation has nothing to do with money, but with the employees, how they are led and how much the company can adjust and embrace necessary innovation skills.

SB: What are the forces that block innovation?

PM: The core operating model of a business keeps things running. While at one point in the history of a business, core was innovative, now it is often the primary and expected means of company success. It's what pays the bills and is staffed by those who have been trained to operate within established company norms. Yes, the core ensures "survival and profit," however; there is a natural tension between those committed to the core and those within the innovation communities. The former protects "it's always been this way" mindset and the latter proposes new experimentation.

SB: Can we develop skills and an innovative mindset?

PM: Yes, the inner architecture of innovation is made up of three skills: discovery, execution and leadership. One must think creatively and laterally in order to come up with surprising solutions. They must have the skills to execute as well as lead projects that are a "portfolio of wild, crazy guesses."

A defining characteristic of an innovation project is that you have a low "knowledge to assumption" ratio. These are new projects so assumptions and guesses are inevitable. But unfortunately in the classic business world we are not trained to guess, but rather must always perform that which we know.

An innovation project should not resemble a regular or safe project, but rather embrace energetic and creative ideas that are supported from within. Paradoxes emerge from those under the influence of conventional business mindsets. One is the "ambition paradox". This paradox occurs when employees are told to innovate, but propose ideas with the sole goal of pleasing their bosses. Therefore, the more ambitious the person is, the less likely they are to innovate if the business culture holds leaders responsible for a return of investment.

Given globalization, financial crises and increasing talent mobility, companies need to constantly innovate, and not solely depend on the core model as their competitive force. Alignment from the top of the house, going all the way down supports a sense that "we can do this, we trust that our ideas will be heard."

SB: Where have you seen this change in beliefs on innovation?

PM: My favorite example is the multi-year work we've been doing with a Fortune 20 telecommunications company. BTS started from the top and systematically worked their way down; everyone defines their innovation strategy in thirty words or less. The employee *can* innovate and management is behind them. Without this support, even those attempting to innovate may feel cynical if those above them do not respond to their ideas.

In conclusion, with all that is said about innovation recently, we know it is a skill that can be taught, practiced and mastered. For successful implementation HR is in the ideal role to help define a culture that welcomes the necessary place for experimentation and proposals of new ideas. HR can model this with a new lens that challenges old models and makes way for the new. But when innovation is mastered, it will engage employees and be a competitive advantage.



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