

The Intrapreneur's Illness: How The Corporate Innovation Fever Is Threatening Innovative Leaders

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I recently had five separate conversations with intrapreneurs in a global company – through these discussions, the symptoms of an Intrapreneur's Illness emerged. Something I had been struggling to fully grasp for a while had become clear.

Each of my interlocutors revealed the widening gap between their institution's platitudes and the realities of innovating within organizations. Many self-proclaimed 'innovation gurus' refer to this contradiction as the new reality of organizational life, freely throwing about terms like 'bipolar' and 'ambidextrous'.

The darkside of this dichotomy is as palpable as it is toxic, and results in much the same ways for everyone: frustration, disillusionment, wanderlust.

My objective in this article is not to revisit the organizational realities of innovation, but to reflect on this Intrapreneurs' Dilemma. Ideally, their experiences provide insights on how intrapreneurs can handle this imposed schizophrenia to nurture their innovative identity.

On the surface, the intrapreneurs I spoke with are undoubtedly successful.

One and all they lead initiatives that realize and exceed their corporate innovation mandate by facilitating the transformation from a product-centric focus, toward realizing a company based on the true value of the consumer and society both.

Their innovation efforts are impressive: a crowdsourcing innovative platform, an internal innovation program to improve efficiency and transparency, health-conscious improvements in new products & services, innovative manufacturing across categories to reduce waste, growth opportunities in developing markets, and a digitally scalable leadership development program to strengthen top talent.

In addition to their strategic importance, these initiatives implicitly generate business value – new ideas that increase efficiencies, new products that meet evolving consumer demands, and empowering leaders to navigate the challenges of today's ever-shifting market dynamics.

The Frustrations: Fight or Flight?

Despite these successes, nearly every one of them expressed frustration with the incumbent, innovation-naive management. The criticism was consistent and well-considered: Leadership lacks an understanding of the innovation process, interest in new technologies, and credibility when promoting the innovation agenda.

Due to their allegiance and adherence to defined processes, such as HR programs and policies, most often characterized by inflexible – and unquestionable – monthly KPIs and yearly business plans. These leaders have created an atmosphere anathema to the agility and creativity required for innovation. One intrapreneur recounted an instance where upper management unabashedly claimed credit for his success, leaving him without any shred of organizational recognition.

The daily grind of navigating stakeholders to explain the same things again and again, having to seek their approval at every juncture, left the intrapreneurs bruised and exhausted, profoundly impacting their capacity to be innovative leaders.

Perhaps most concerning all, was that despite the talk and even change in uniform (i.e. jeans, colorful socks, or untucked shirts), there remained the lack of a clear business mandate with a defined budget, recognized roles, and resource allocations. And many of these intrapreneurs in the company also had a day job in their function to report on as well.

The rampant fever arising from this deeply rooted innovation contradiction is actually, to an extent, self-inflicted. A natural source for innovation (and interestingly enough in many cases: dependency) is ‘bringing the outside in’. The innovation expectation for inspirational ideas, exposure to startups, incubators and accelerators, opened the intrapreneurs’ eyes to the dynamic startup scene. Despite knowing full well the challenges of leaping into these turbulent waters, the intrapreneurs’ thirst for Innovation Kool-Aid goes unquenched – a thirst we all know well.

As they discover that institutionalizing innovation is, to paraphrase Edison: “one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent alignment” these intrapreneurs are already packing their bags. With confidence in their newfound value proposition, they are planning an innovative itinerary outside the company, with a mid-term runway of six to nine months.

Three Prescriptions for Healthy Intrapreneurship

So, when organizations choose not to innovate in a significant way, what can aspiring (or even accomplished) intrapreneurs do?

First, intrapreneurs need to find personal meaning in innovation. The hard reality in today’s organization is that the leaders who ask for innovation are often far more self-serving than may be initially discernible, and so, conviction is key. Although there was strong commitment to the organizational culture and values – understandably justified in many cases by extensive years of service – the personal benefits of an innovative initiative should be explicit.

Personal meaning can be found at the nexus of value for consumers, society, and the company.

This can take the form of a socially conscious product or service, a transformation to improve lives (internal and external to the organization), or even just producing an article documenting publically their genuine story. All of these validate the innovation intent and inherently validate the innovator.

The result contributes to their brand and helps the intrapreneur shift emotional focus from desiring recognition to creating personal opportunity, from craving organizational influence to seeking to define a broader impact, and from frustration to the thoughtful navigation of the innovation mandate.

Once personal meaning is created, the intrapreneur needs to find an Innovation Advocate. Nearly all the intrapreneurs I spoke with had one. Somewhere in the business, most likely in markets far from corporate centers, there is a leader who has a burning issue. The Innovation Advocate has an excellent business reputation and is therefore well connected

where the most crucial decisions are made. She can assist in making connections, advise on business value, and promote the Intrapreneur's efforts within the market or operation. The Innovation Advocate can leverage immense organizational capital and brand, as may be required within the internal and external ecosystems, to protect the maverick under her wing. With the rise of CSR on the strategic agenda of most organizations, the Innovation Advocate can also encourage the Intrapreneur to make the world a better place, thereby encouraging the development of personal meaning and strengthening the intrapreneurs' conviction. Building on the trust and confidence of an Innovation Advocate, the intrapreneur can unburden frustrations and channel challenges into opportunities for leadership growth.

The journey towards becoming an innovative leader is fraught with complexities and the Innovation Advocate is an essential mentor to ensure the journey is constructive.

However, intrapreneurs need to acknowledge that they live in the fragile space between promotion and redundancy, praise and scorn. This existential edge is a third dimension necessary for intrapreneurs to pursue their inner innovation prophecy with conviction and resilience.

In today's digital reality – characterized by rapidly changing identities – a fluid career attitude is more realistic, and far healthier, for the serial innovator. While organizations may freely encourage intrapreneurs to express their inner spark, the dangers of fire always remain.

Those seeking to pursue real innovation should find satisfaction on the edge, rather than in the core. The intrapreneur can learn much from Icarus, who flew too near the sun on wings of feathers and wax – choose your initiatives carefully.

Be certain there is a burning (and not too subtle) business need within a market or function to increase the likelihood of some success. That success may often be your only shield. Otherwise, be prepared for the consequences of falling back to earth.

Corporates: Innovate Responsibility

Although these reflections come from the intrapreneur's perspective, ultimately it is the organizations themselves that must evaluate the sincerity and depth of their innovation agenda.

If there is a clear strategic need to innovate – not just iterate to improve current products and services – then the proper infrastructure must be built. Driving the 10% rather than the 10x should be a strategic and shared decision.

In my recent experiences, many innovation programs are more akin to marketing campaigns. From internal efforts and advertising campaigns to the financial support of an incubator, accelerator or hackathon – these efforts merely speak to what innovative leaders want, but cannot alone fulfill their professional ambitions, causing disappointment, frustration and demotivation in the entire concept.

HR also needs to be involved in the innovation reflection, to plan how to prevent the Intreprenurial Illness from becoming an epidemic that depletes the brain power of talented leaders within established organizations, and is sure to hamstring any potential new innovators.