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► Are you fostering a culture that supports innovation?

Innovative Leadership

Culture Leverages Innovation Capability™

Do You Have A Hidden Monster Preventing Innovation?

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Think back. Did you ever ask your parents to check for monsters under your bed? Are your children or grandchildren afraid of the big, bad monster lurking in the closet? Most adults smile fondly at their children and check around to assure them that everything is fine. We recognize that the fear may be irrational, but a child cannot settle down until they know they are safe. What is the child really afraid of? The unknown. They can't see under the bed or in the closet because it is dark. What they can't see or what they don't know, they instinctively fear.

Fear of the Unknown

As adults we know there are no monsters under the bed, but we still fear the unknown. H.P. Lovecraft wrote, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." This is why a lot of people are resistant to suggest ideas or support innovation and change. Most adults enjoy and prefer some level of structure, routine and predictability. It gives them the perception of control. If it is familiar, it is comfortable – even if it isn't good for them in the long run. Unfortunately, we all know people who stay in a job they don't like and that doesn't suit them because it is familiar. They may grumble and complain, but they don't actually do anything to improve things. They are convinced there is a monster out there that is going to get them if they push beyond their comfort zone.

Importance

Why is this important to a business leader? You are being squeezed. On the business front, the speed of change is increasing. Leaders recognize that companies that are not right-this-minute driving innovation within their organization and industry are falling behind. In order to stay competitive, you need employees to be open and actually advocating for improvements and change. But, employees are not embracing change or taking the initiative to try new approaches. The leader is caught in the center, trying to come up with the ideas and then overcoming the resistance to make them happen. Leaders are wearing themselves out trying to do it all alone. It is absolutely frustrating and not a successful, long-term strategy.

Culture of Innovation

One of the complaints I hear most often from leaders is "I am asking for new thinking and ideas, but I don't get anything back." As a leader, you need to deal with the monster under your employees' bed. Does your culture reward people for trying new things or punish them for not getting it perfect the first time? If someone in your group came up with a wild idea, how would you and your team respond? Would you make fun of them? Would you tell them that is not the way we do things around here? Or, would you embrace the idea and ask for more? Not all ideas are going to work, especially the first time. Most successful new ideas come after many iterations and experiments. You need to take away the fear of the unknown and make employees feel safe to suggest, try, fail and adapt. You need to build a culture that encourages and teaches employees how to be innovative.

If the process of generating ideas becomes expected, rewarded, familiar, safe and fun, then you have chased the monster away! You can create an idea machine. Once employees become exposed to alternative ways of doing things and see good things happening with ideas, (even if they are not their own ideas) they quickly become comfortable with not only generating, but supporting them. Exposure to new and different thinking broadens employees' perspectives and advances their mental models. The more positive experiences people have with change and innovation, the more they are willing to expand beyond their current comfort zone. If you had all your employees thinking about ways to make things better, that would leave your competition in the dust. What would that do to your bottom-line results?

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People are actually quite adaptable. Individuals react and cope with change based on what they have recently lived through or experienced. Our research using the CliC Innovation tool shows that many people are more innovative and creative than they believe. Once they learn they can contribute, and you remove the monster, a whole new world opens up. If employees think that generating and implementing new ideas is appreciated and rewarded (not necessarily with money but with recognition, opportunities, etc.) they look forward to participating.

To develop a culture that embraces innovation (i.e., to chase away the monster), your employees must understand:

- The need for innovation and change. What is the compelling story? What are the possibilities? Why is it good for them?
- The desired type of innovation. Do you want them to focus on making things more efficient or generating completely new ideas? (It is important the leadership team think through this so you get the types of ideas you really want and can support.)
- The process for change. How is innovation going to happen? How is it going to be fostered, resourced and supported?
- How they will improve their innovation skills. Innovation skills and capabilities can be taught and expanded. What training are you going to provide that helps employees build their skills?
- This is not the initiative of the quarter, but a sustained and important process.
- Leaders will support employees who step up and challenge the status quo. (By the way, this is one of the hardest parts of the change for top executives: allowing themselves to be challenged and giving employees some latitude to try different ideas.)
- Success as well as failure will be celebrated. Everyone is comfortable celebrating successes. But, getting good at failing fast and celebrating the learning from your failures is important too.

Innovation is not for leaders who only want to stay in their comfort zone. But it is essential for any business that wants to be ahead of their competitors. You need to reach out of your comfort zone, broaden your thinking and be open to new opportunities. You need to pull the monster out from under the bed and address it so it isn't scary anymore. You need to embrace innovation and create the culture that allows the team to participate and make it happen. You cannot do it alone. Everyone in the organization needs to see that being innovative presents an opportunity to participate and excel. By working together, you can solve complex problems and create long-term business success!

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“Slowness to change usually means fear of the new.”

[Phil Crosby](#)