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How to Lead With Success an Innovation Process

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ABSTRACT

Given the social, demographic, economic and technological changes that are occurring nowadays, the enterprise can only respond innovating. Innovation represents changing, therefore difficulty. The process must be correctly led to obtain the desired objectives. Therefore, leadership and innovation are two of the big challenges, closely related, that not only our companies, but the whole society have risen.

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Leading is getting a team to have the right attitude. Leading is an art. Leading an innovation and change process is even more so.

Leading means getting people to do what they have to do, because they are convinced of it; but it is not about getting results at any price nor being fully in charge, it is not about having power; it is, rather, about having authority, persuasion skills, and influence.

Lao Tse, a Chinese philosopher of the 4th century BC and author of Tao Te Ching (The Book of the Way and Power), the base of Taoist philosophy, is right in stating that "a leader is best when people barely know that he exists". When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, "We did this ourselves." Really brilliant. This approach has many advantages, especially one: it avoids envy, one of the biggest risks of failure and one of the major obstacles to be overcome. The leader is the catalyst of reaction and then disappears.

It is very interesting to observe how, already at that time, intelligent people like Lao Tse advised the authorities to intervene as little as possible in the life of the people and not to burden them with taxes and regulations. I share that idea; perhaps the reader thinks that this reflection is not appropriate here, but I have not repressed myself and also think that it is relevant indeed, because a good leader needs to allow the team some space, know how to delegate, trust them; in the same way that a good political leader has to rely on their citizens, not overdo their control and treat them like criminals, when it usually goes the other way round, that the leaders are the actual criminals.

Leading innovation is being able to communicate “bad news”, such as that people will have to work harder and differently. The leader is the messenger who announces that they must leave the comfort zone, routine. You must know how to communicate that idea, but above all, you have to convince.

The leader needed to promote or manage an innovation process must be a Renaissance-type person, that is, a generalist, not a specialist technician. They must have an overview or at least be able to set up a team, whose members provide different viewpoints on the same challenge. Reality is, at least, a three-dimensional polyhedron, has many uneven sides. You cannot contemplate it from one standpoint alone, because a flat projection, a partial, limited vision is thus obtained. Let us look at reality from different angles and be observant. I felt highly supported in this approach when I saw that the picture of the polyhedron is also used by Pope Francis.

The ancient Romans distinguished between power and authority. Authority is always better than power. Power is a guiding or coercive authority. For example, state power makes you pay taxes, and, if you do not, you will get a fine and even a prison sentence. Authority, however, must be understood as prestige, credit, recognition, legitimacy based on quality, competence, knowledge about a subject. Penalizing or imposing must be the last option for a leader, who has to resort to using power only when there is no other choice; but they should not waive it, because sometimes you have to use it. When the force of reason does not work, we must, unfortunately, apply the reason of force.

Just like the bishop has a miter (High and pointed head cloth of Jewish origin, with which Catholic and Armenian bishops, abbots, and abbesses cover their heads in liturgical ceremonies) and a staff, the leader must have wisdom and authority, but also power. The miter is not only a sign of dignity, but, above all, a sign of wisdom and knowledge. For its part, the staff is the sign of the pastor and serves to correct the lost sheep. The goal of the leader is to establish an environment of disciplined collaboration, such as Morten T. Hansen, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, states in his book, *Collaboration*.

Projects are a serious thing, they are not a party. There is no room for mistakes, failing to observe dates, doing things halfway, errors in amounts, being late at meetings, or throwing cogs in the wheels. Unfortunately, these bad practices are permitted too many times, because whoever is at the front is a coordinator, not a leader or a person in charge, and lacks a minimum of power. Less coordinators and more directors are needed.

Someone has to grant the power, someone from above: the management. The leader needs a good sponsor who supports and monitors them. We must always ask whether we have sufficient authority before hitting the stick, lest we are disavowed.

In short, the ten best practices to lead an innovation process and which have been discussed throughout my book *Analyze, Act, Advance* are as follows:

1. Involving representatives of the entire organization, starting with the most influential people, from the very beginning of the process.
2. Selling the process. Dedicating resources to market the project.
3. Listening, asking, taking time with those most directly affected by the change, accompanying them while they develop their daily work. Detecting where they have difficulties, where it hurts them.
4. The analysis and design stages are critical. Designs must not only be accurate and correct, but, above all, simple.
5. Knowing how to manage meetings. Watch out for large meetings, problems must be solved in advance. Agreements are reached before starting the meetings.
6. Prioritizing one-by-one contacts. Be careful with email. It is more convenient to use the phone or, even better, still make video calls. Always improve your own communication skills. Having a beer, a coffee, or a glass of wine at the right moment helps.
7. Be very strict about testing systems in the laboratory and in an actual situation. Quality control is very important. Perform load and stress tests.
8. Training should not be left for the very last moment, because it helps to sell an innovation. Education, selling, setting up an innovative system should run parallel to the project development and must be refreshed later.
9. Adjust the solution. Excellence can be found in the details: you have to fine-tune adjustments.
10. Celebrate the project completion, take a short break, and start again.

The person in charge of a project or an innovative process should be as follows:

- Renaissance-type.
- Good communicator.
- Good negotiator.

- Innovative and imaginative.
- Able to delegate.
- Good at listening.
- Able to link differently in knowledge, technologies, and insights.
- A little bad-tempered and moderately rude.

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