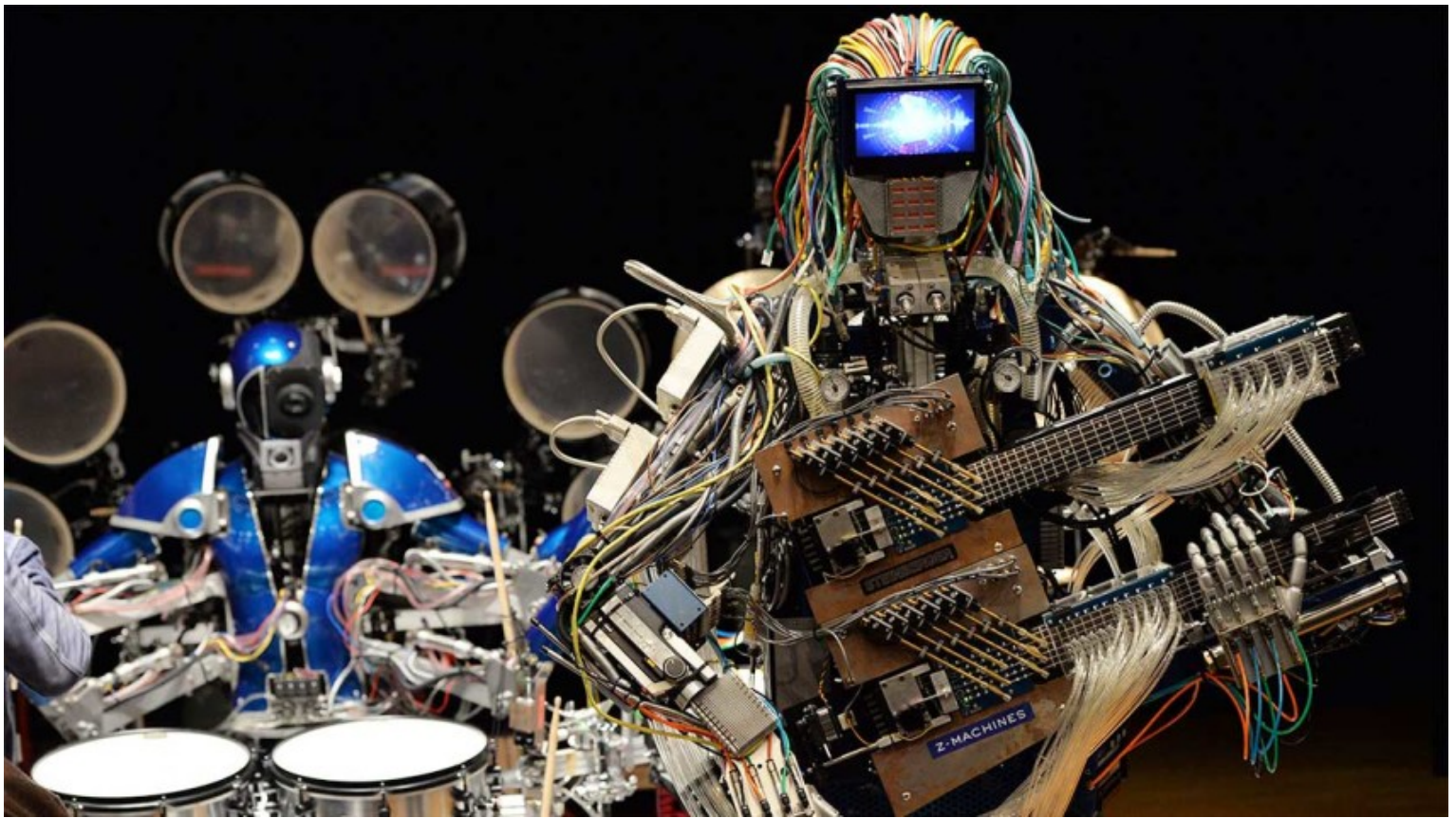INNOVATION

Leadership May Not Be the Problem with Your Innovation Team

by Daniel Dworkin and Markus Spiegel

August 25, 2016

Last November we published an assessment on HBR.org to help readers diagnose the extent to which their organizations create conditions that favor successful innovation. About 1,500 people completed the assessment, representing organizations across industries at different stages of maturity. Despite enormous attention placed on improving innovation effectiveness, 80% of participants thought their companies were

underperforming on this front. Unsurprisingly, those working for older, larger businesses scored lowest in all four innovation conditions: constant energy, creative friction, flexible structure, and purposeful discovery.
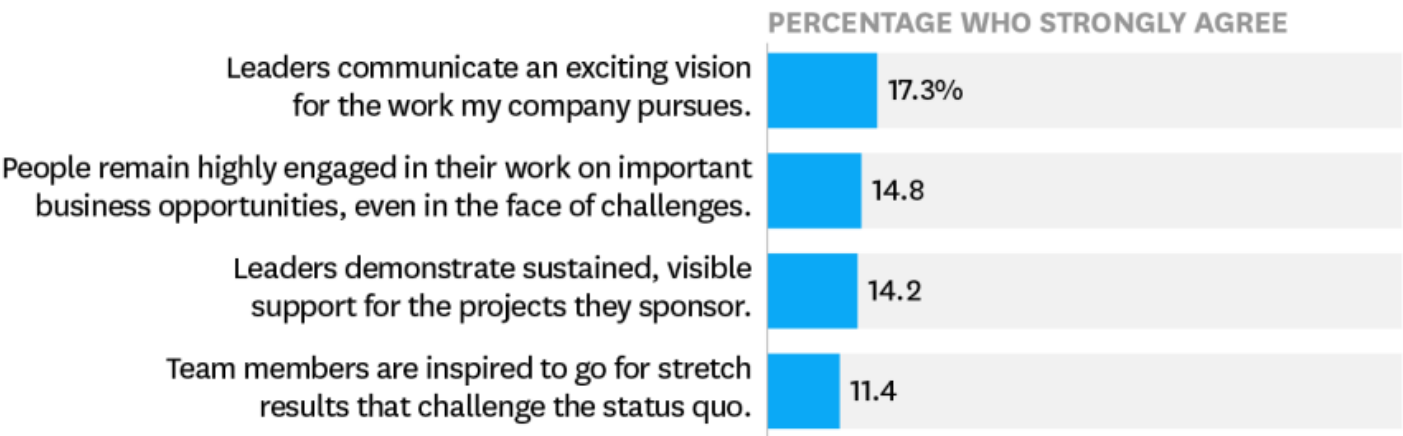
We expected people to point the finger at leadership (or lack thereof) to explain their organizations' innovation struggles. While respondents did note some gaps in leadership effectiveness, they were more likely to highlight opportunities for their team members to improve.

Here's what the data tells us about how these HBR readers rate their organizations and colleagues on the four conditions. We've also included a few tips to address the lowest-scoring responses in each category. This advice should help whether you're about to kick off a new innovation project or your team is already off and running.

Condition 1: Constant Energy is productive tension that keeps people in the innovation zone.

HBR Readers Report That Their Team Members Aren't Inspired to Go for Stretch Results

According to 1,570 survey responses.

PERCENTAGE WHO STRONGLY AGREE

Leaders communicate an exciting vision for the work my company pursues.	17.3%
People remain highly engaged in their work on important business opportunities, even in the face of challenges.	14.8
Leaders demonstrate sustained, visible support for the projects they sponsor.	14.2
Team members are inspired to go for stretch results that challenge the status quo.	11.4

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As this chart shows, only 11% of survey participants think their colleagues are inspired to aim for stretch results.
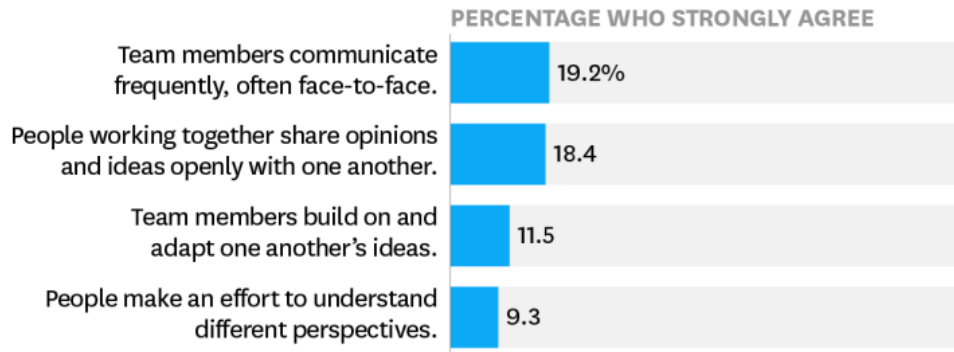
Innovation requires an ongoing sense of excitement and urgency to address a critical challenge. In many cases inspiration doesn't simply strike; it must be perpetually cultivated. To keep everyone engaged, try the following:

- **Name your limitations.** Have everyone on the team consider: What's holding back your innovation potential? Are you unclear on where to focus? Do you fear failure? Is your time constrained? Discuss these energy drainers together and agree on how to help each other get your heads and hearts in the game. Identifying what's dampening your aspirations is a good first step in figuring out how to achieve them.
- **Connect with your purpose.** For most of us, financial rewards are an important but insufficient part of motivation. What value do you want to create in the world? What problems are you excited about solving, and why? Reflect on these questions individually, discuss them as a team, and determine how to focus your collective efforts on an opportunity that matters.
- **Play under the lights**. People work harder when they know others are watching. Work together to identify the stakeholders that should be aware of your team's work and create a plan to engage them to make your project more visible. The spotlight will help you to stay energized and on task and to build a network of allies to support your cause.

Condition 2: Creative Friction involves rich interactions that generate diverse ideas.

While People Talk Often, HBR Readers Report That Colleagues Don't Take the Time to Listen

According to 1,570 survey responses.

PERCENTAGE WHO STRONGLY AGREE

Team members communicate frequently, often face-to-face.	19.2%
People working together share opinions and ideas openly with one another.	18.4
Team members build on and adapt one another's ideas.	11.5
People make an effort to understand different perspectives.	9.3

SOURCE "ASSESSMENT: IS YOUR COMPANY ACTUALLY READY TO INNOVATE?" BY DANIEL DWORKIN AND MARKUS SPIEGEL

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Just 9% of respondents believe their team members make an effort to understand different perspectives.
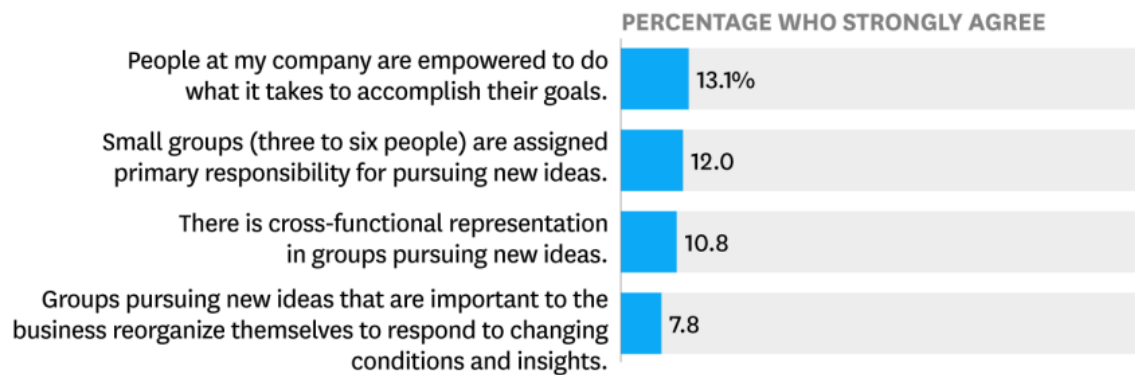
It's important to advocate passionately for what you believe in. However, listening, observing, and interpreting are equally important to the innovation process.

- **Practice radical empathy.** We often dismiss ideas we don't understand or agree with. But adopting a beginner's mindset is critical to solving innovation challenges. Instead of poking holes in your teammates' ideas, ask questions to better understand where they're coming from. Instead of dismissing "crazy ideas," build on them and encourage others to do the same. There may be a seed of inspiration to be found in notions that seem outrageous at first.
- **Get out of your silos.** To better understand how your colleagues think, try immersing yourself in their worlds — and have them do the same. Walk the floor, join a work session, or support a project driven by another business unit. Breaking down job silos will build trust and help everyone see the world through their teammates' eyes.

Condition 3: Flexible Structure maximizes speed and agility.

HBR Readers Say Their Teams Struggle with Self-Organization

According to 1,570 survey responses.

PERCENTAGE WHO STRONGLY AGREE

People at my company are empowered to do what it takes to accomplish their goals.	13.1%
Small groups (three to six people) are assigned primary responsibility for pursuing new ideas.	12.0
There is cross-functional representation in groups pursuing new ideas.	10.8
Groups pursuing new ideas that are important to the business reorganize themselves to respond to changing conditions and insights.	7.8

Only 8% of participants agree that groups pursuing innovation reorganize themselves to respond to changing conditions and insights.
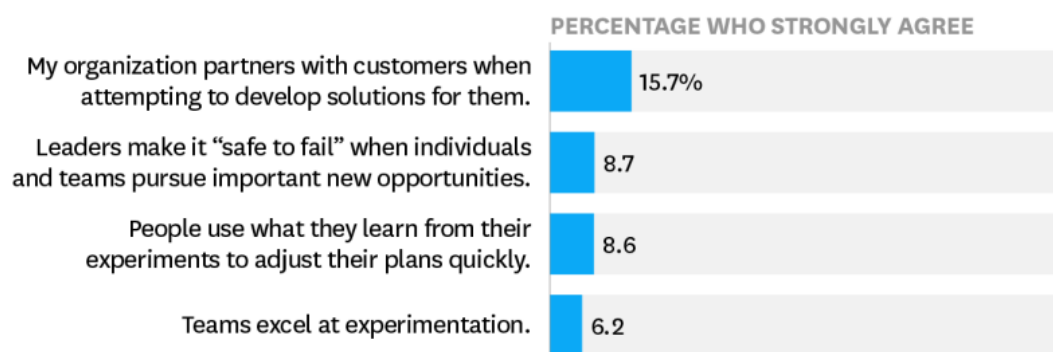
Innovation teams must adapt and evolve based on new insights. Too often, rigid processes inhibit teams from changing direction, creating subteams, or swapping team members. Leaders generally have a strong voice in determining innovation structure, process, and organization. However, as organizations begin to recognize that "command and control" leadership is ill suited to the complex, ambiguous challenge of innovation, team members' influence on structural decision making will grow stronger.

- **Fall in love with the problem, not your solution.** It's easy to become enamored with an idea, especially when you've invested a lot of time developing it. But your likes and dislikes should be subordinate to your customers'. That's why it's critical to stay focused on solving their problems rather than selling them on your solution. Be on the lookout for signs of overadvocating or being too attached to ideas, and speak up when team members lead with a pitch instead of tuning in to customer needs.
- **Embrace the pivot.** Taking innovation work in a new direction is a sign of learning and confidence. Successful teams make potential pivots a part of ongoing discussion: What are we learning? How should we adapt our plan? Do we have the right people and skill sets represented? Do we need support from above for our decisions? Make these questions part of your regular meeting agenda and update your plan accordingly.

Condition 4: Purposeful Discovery means testing possibilities to develop user-centered solutions.

HBR Readers Say Their Teams Don't Excel at Experimentation

According to 1,570 survey responses.

PERCENTAGE WHO STRONGLY AGREE

My organization partners with customers when attempting to develop solutions for them.	15.7%
Leaders make it "safe to fail" when individuals and teams pursue important new opportunities.	8.7
People use what they learn from their experiments to adjust their plans quickly.	8.6
Teams excel at experimentation.	6.2

Only 6% of participants strongly agree that teams excel at experimentation.

Designing effective tests that engage customers to validate hypotheses is central to the innovation process. Because most people, particularly those working for established organizations, are used to executing repeatable tasks, experimentation muscles are often underdeveloped. As you're planning and carrying out your discovery process, consider doing the following to ensure that the team builds this capability and designs productive, customer-focused experiments:

- **Start with assumptions.** Clarifying what your team believes to be true is a good place to begin the experiment design process. What are the customer needs that must be addressed? How does your solution address those needs? Why should customers choose your solution over existing ones? Once the team has answered these questions, make a plan to engage with customers to validate and update your thinking.
- **When in doubt, try it out.** If your team is wavering about whether to apply an idea or debate its merits hypothetically, lean toward a test. Even if it fails, you'll learn something in the process. And supporting a team member's bid to pursue a quick, low-cost experiment is good for group dynamics.

- **Draw it or build it.** The MIT Media Lab's motto is "Demo or die," and for good reason. Creating opportunities for colleagues and customers to see, touch, and interact with emerging ideas illuminates their beliefs, habits, and preferences. Don't overinvest in early-stage mock-ups and prototypes; simpler is better until you have a strong, evidence-based handle on customer needs. (Think IDEO's approach to developing minimum viable products.)

The results of our assessment leave no doubt that there is significant opportunity to improve the way organizations innovate. Leaders have a central role to play in creating the conditions for teams to be successful. But team members can make substantial improvements on their own — and drive personal and professional growth at the same time. It takes both top-down support and bottom-up effort for innovation to thrive.

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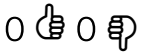Related Topics: Collaboration

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1 COMMENTS

Alex Westner   3 years ago

Nice article. Two adds: First, I think folks need to get out of the *building*, not just their silos, and spend some time with customers. Second, yes, falling in love with your solution is not healthy, but I believe companies need to fall in love with their customers, not the problem: http://www.spark23.com/spark23-blog/2016/8/23/love-the-customer-not-the-problem-nor-the-solution

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