

Cory Nezin

On the Accuracy of Tom Peter's Initial Ideas

This paper relates my own experiences during my internships and part time work to Tom Peter's initial ideas. In particular, I will relate my experiences to the eight common themes which Peters said were indicative of a successful company.

First, a bias for action. Because I worked for a government contractor, MIT Lincoln Lab, this is a tricky one. While there was a bias for action on the lower level decisions, the institute ultimately follows very strict, and time consuming guidelines. Of course this is not for nothing – the institute has larger concerns than their own profit, the security of our nation. The fact that Lincoln Lab is so closely tied with our government means that they might not follow the same tenants to be successful.

In terms of being close to the customer, Lincoln Lab is king. Ultimately since most of Lincoln Lab's efforts are in support of defense, the customer is the military and in particular soldiers. Soldiers often come directly to Lincoln Lab, and Lincoln Lab interns some time go on to become soldiers. It is of the utmost importance that the technology which the lab develops is not just scientifically interesting but also useful to the people who will be using it.

The lab fosters innovation and autonomy by letting lower level staff pursue their own projects and make their own decisions regarding the high level projects they are working on. They foster the same things in their interns. There was a program that I participated in which allowed every intern to come up with their own idea and essentially market it to higher level staff. If they pass the first phase, they can go on to prototype their idea and eventually apply for intellectual ownership.

The lab finds all of its success in productivity through people. The bottom of the organization is fairly flat, and while there is certainly a difference in authority between junior and senior scientists, all ideas are treated equally. In the meetings I had, an outside observer would not be able to tell the difference between an employee that had been there ten years and an employee that had been there one year. It is this equal treatment of ideas that allows innovation to flourish.

Management is more hands off than hands on at the lab however. Rank and file employees are given a lot of freedom which sometimes means they are not given much guidance. I am only speaking from my experience at the intern level, though I did not see too much interaction between my immediate superior and his superior either.

I would also say that the lab often deviates from the norm rather than sticking to it (“stick to the knitting”) but when innovation is the name of the game this is a must. Of course, they stick to engineering and prototyping, but they often pursue new ideas which they may have little experience in. This is not a bad thing however, it is the only way to discover new technologies and techniques.

The lab has a lean staff in that it is very bottom heavy. There is little waste on high level managers and most employment goes toward the rank and file. This is possible via decentralization – lower level staff are able to operate on their own terms.

The lab has a fairly strong culture and encourages central values. A surprising amount of the central values are rooted in patriotism. At the end of the day, when the national anthem plays, everyone outside would stop and look toward the flag – rain or shine. Everyone takes pride in protecting our country and that is a large part of what drives the great work they do.

