

Enabling Mastery Drives Employee Innovation

Could it be that encouraging employee innovation has more to do with an environment that allows for mastery and less with monetary rewards? Enabling mastery in your organisation is a reward in itself. Create the right environment and employees will generate and implement many worthwhile innovations.

Creating a platform for employees to innovate and improve their organisation is slowly becoming standard practice. Organisations are realising that employees have hands-on experience and if allowed they will generate solutions to cut costs, streamline processes and introduce new products and services.

Apart from the obvious benefits in organisational efficiency, effectiveness and growth, innovation platforms enable employees to engage with their organisation. Gallupⁱ research has shown that the more engaged employees are, the more they innovate.

As these employee innovation programmes mushroom, one of the main questions to be answered is how to motivate employees to innovate. In many cases, a combination of reward and recognition is applied with rewards being predominantly monetary.

According to Daniel H Pink – much of the work in organisations in the 21st century is, due to the increased complexity and creativity required, way beyond Motivation 1.0 (instinctual drive to survive) and even Motivation 2.0 (carrots and sticks method). Our modern day work environment requires what Pink describes as Motivation 3.0: an environment that allows employees **autonomy**, opportunity to **master** and **purpose**. Innovation certainly fits these criteria therefore qualifies for motivation 3.0 as a driver.

All three the elements Pink identified are important and impact directly on the quality and quantity of employee innovation. Mastering “mastery” however, could be a sound first step to encourage employees to innovate.

What is Mastery?

In the Visual Thesaurusⁱⁱ “master” (be or become completely proficient or skilled in), is connected to words like superior/victor (a combatant who has the ability to defeat rivals), and control (have a firm knowledge and understanding).

Pink links mastery to three laws, namely:

1. **Mastery is a mindset:** The appropriate mindset is only possible if your self-belief is based on incremental theoryⁱⁱⁱ, not entity theory. Take for example beliefs about intelligence. In the latter, employees believe that their intelligence is similar to their physical length – there is not much one can do about it. Incremental theorists equate intelligence to strength – the more you exercise the stronger (more intelligent) you get.
2. **Mastery is pain:** As explained by Anders Ericsson^{iv} who studied expert performance: “Many characteristics once believed to reflect innate talent are actually the result of intense practice for a minimum of 10 years.”
3. **Mastery is an asymptote:** A term from the algebra field, an asymptote is a line not touched by a curve. In the same way mastery is never really achieved, there is always room for improvement. “Mastery attracts because mastery eludes”.

The implications for employee innovation

Enabling mastery to motivate employee innovation impacts your innovation process, organisational culture and reward system. Here are some starting points:

1. **Value all ideas** by allowing and encouraging implementation and recognising effort, even if the innovation was not successful.
2. **Encourage a mastery mindset** by making it an inherent part of your culture. Believe that your organisation can improve/innovate and communicate success stories to substantiate that belief. Innovation as an abstract organisational value is not enough.
3. **Enable employees to master** through innovation training, implementation assistance and coaching. Employees need the tools and skills as well as an organisation that allows and supports them to generate, prototype, refine and implement their ideas.
4. **Create opportunities to master** – as the line manager, know your employees and what they are passionate about – know what is it that they want to master that fits with your strategic objectives. Create opportunities that are not prescriptive – set goals, but allow individuals to explore the methodology and process to achieve the goal.
5. If mastery is a motivational driver, then **enabling mastery will be a reward**. Reward your innovative employees through:
 - Facilitating one-on-one expert assistance with idea development and implementation,

- Ensuring sufficient budget to test or implement ideas,
- Allowing more thinking and creative time,
- Giving individuals status as a recognised co-creator of the organisation,
- Providing additional training and education.

There should be less emphasis on rewarding innovation and more effort put into enabling mastery as it cultivates true employee engagement. The opportunity to master, leads employees to believing that they are champions and motivates them to walk the extra mile(s). Complete mastery may be elusive, but striving towards it remains a noble and worthwhile goal all round, particularly when you innovate.

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ⁱ Gallup Management Journal, Gallup Study: Engaged Employees Inspire Company Innovation, 12 October 2006

ⁱⁱ www.visualthesaurus.com

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.learning-theories.com/self-theories-dweck.html>

^{iv} DH Pink, (2009) Drive, Riverhead Books, p 124