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Five tips for leaders to bring out their teams' 'intrapreneurial' spirit

We know the names of famous and innovative entrepreneurs but, as Alan Manly explains, employees can play an important role in a company's success.



By Alan Manly
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By Aleksandra Sulimko

Everyone has heard of famous entrepreneurs such as Gates of Microsoft, Musk of Tesla and, of course, Zuckerberg of Meta. An entrepreneur is defined as a person who organizes and manages any enterprise, especially a business, usually with considerable initiative and risk. But what about 'intrapreneurs'?

An intrapreneur is an employee of a large corporation who is given freedom and financial support to create new products, services and systems and may not have to follow the corporation's usual routines or protocols. Such employees are highly valuable as they offer innovative ways of thinking and often feel connected and invested in the growth of the organization.

Below are five tips on how to bring out your team's intrapreneurial spirit.

Step one: Appoint an entrepreneur or intrapreneur to lead the team



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The leader will need to be either entrepreneurial or a successful intrapreneur. If you need to develop an intrapreneurial team from scratch, hire someone who has proven experience doing so. The success of the team will be heavily based on the characteristics of the chosen intrapreneur.

Step two: Understand the risks





If the leader is an entrepreneur and seeks others to contribute as Intrapreneurs, a massive challenge will present itself. Delegation of authority is hard enough for an entrepreneur, but a whole new frontier is opened up when delegating authority for others to act in a manner that could cost a lot of money and damage the reputation of the company.

This situation will require a heroic amount of confidence in the appointed Intrapreneur. It's best that the leader knows and appreciates the full scope of the risks being taken early in the process.

Step three: Reward risk-takers



While the professional risk is shared and the leader will be canned if the project fails, it is the Intrapreneur who will also be putting their reputation on the line and investing emotional energy.

Pay a reward upfront to the person who is risking their good name and reputation for an unproven project. A project-based pay rise will be a statement of support and demonstrate that there is a risk and a corresponding reward for being an intrapreneur.

Step four: Lock-in the whole team



Intrapreneurial projects will most likely succeed if they are sold to the whole organization from day one. A broad outline of the goals of the project should be developed such that no secrets are revealed - only that it has been declared that change is coming.

This is a great way to gain support for the project and flush out opponents early in the development cycle. Remember, critics may be right, so it's well worth drawing them into the broader conversation. Accept all input and work through the discussion. Better now than later.

Jumping out of the dark and telling everyone that the future will be better than the present risks creating resentment. Employees will often leap to the defense of the known. There has to be some sizzle in your sell. Explaining that you are building the company to compete with the competition is a tried-and-tested statement and can work to your advantage.

Step five: Set KPIs





Know what the project is. The devil is in the detail. Therefore, detailed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are needed to give confidence that the project is well thought out and a real opportunity to improve the company and also enhance the intrapreneur's reputation and career.

This is the really hard part. Whipping up enthusiasm for a goal is always possible. Selling the understanding that there are time and financial restraints is always a less exciting part of the journey.

Business is war

Sun Tzu said, "The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom."

A good intrapreneur in business is like the general: less concerned about fame and recognition; willing to take ownership and learn from their mistakes; and motivated by the contribution they can make to the success of their company.



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