
One Question Leaders Should Ask Themselves



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Creativity and innovation are unlocked by leaders who enable others.

A personal care company that is part of my acceleration portfolio could never have envisioned sharing prime retail space with the giants in its product category. Thanks to e-commerce, it does so today and quite promisingly so.

Traditional size-based and time-based competitive advantages are fast evaporating. In fact, in many cases, tech-enabled business models are turning size-based advantage into a handicap.

Uber doesn't own a single car and AirBnB doesn't own any hotel room. In just six years, asset-less messaging app Whatsapp has one billion users, a figure most large telecom companies took decades to reach. Even in the financial sector, peer-to-peer lending platforms are hot on the heels of established banks.

Established companies could face an existential crisis as conventional advantages evaporate, entry barriers lower and rate of disruption grows.

However, they must take heart from the one durable advantage they have over start-ups: top talent.

Most start-ups struggle to find top talent, an asset successful corporations have in abundance.

Yet, somehow this advantage does not seem to be working as far as corporate innovation is concerned. I'm always amazed by the overwhelming responses I get from senior executives at big companies willing to mentor start-ups free of charge. They find the process extremely rewarding. Their enthusiasm is palpable, but also reflects the fact that they don't get such opportunities at work.

This is disappointing especially since successful organisations, laden with top talent, could have a vibrant symbiosis of ideas and mentoring.

The missing enablers

Since I regularly meet corporate executives developing their ideas in stealth mode (more often in the same sector as their current employer), I feel that the problem lies with senior (and mid-senior) management failing to enable them.

And maybe these leaders are not to be blamed either.

After scouring resumes of CxO candidates on some global job search sites, I realised that role descriptions often ran to pages (of course, innovation was a frequent key word). These lengthy descriptions, with their multiple sections, gave me a sense of how big organisations make many creative executives feel as free as a railway carriage: free to move but only on the predefined tracks. This approach cannot foster the kinds of innovations currently coming from the fringes.

Unleashing talent

How do organisations un-bottle their smart, experienced and capable managers so they can be the enablers of an innovation culture rather than the sponsors of a knee-jerk innovation?

Leaders can often help others through asking them questions. But I came across a story that revealed a crucial question leaders can ask themselves in order to become enablers.

This true story was narrated by one of the most admired business leaders of our times, Rajiv Bajaj, the Managing Director of Bajaj Auto. Credited with executing a mammoth corporate innovation mission that turned around the fortunes of one of India's largest auto-makers, he is known for his straight talk and uncluttered views.

Many years back, his company had brought in an eminent Japanese professor as a consultant for an ambitious and critical product line introduction. As the professor landed in India, Bajaj went to the hotel to welcome him.

After pleasantries were exchanged with the eminent but terse academic, the conversation went something like this:

Eminent Japanese Professor: "So, what do you do?"

Business Leader: "I am the Vice President of Products."

"That is your designation. I want to know what you do."

"Well, I make motorcycles."

"So, how many did you make today?"

"I do not make the bikes myself, I have people who do."

"Okay, so what do you do?"

"Well, I sell bikes."

"So, how many did you sell today?"

"I do not sell bikes myself, I have people who do."

"Okay, so what do you do?"

"I design the bikes."

"So, how many have you designed today?"

After an uncomfortable silence.

"So, what do you think I do?"

“Well, you have only one job: helping people be better at their jobs.”

This was an eye-opener which gave the business leader great clarity about his role. The next day, the professor visited the company office and ran into the business leader at lunch.

“So, what do you do?” asked the professor once more.

“I help people become better at their jobs.”

“So, how many people have you helped today?”

According to this story, the role description for all senior managers should simply be: helping people become better at their jobs. Apart from reducing ambiguity, this role description also brings nurturing and compassion into the professional sphere and allows the battle-weary senior management to find greater purpose.

If organisations want to become future-ready, they cannot force-innovate. They need to innovate naturally, almost involuntarily. To do that, they must help their business leaders nurture creativity and innovation naturally, almost involuntarily too.

So, what do you do?

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