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Time To Set Bold Targets

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The best way to spur innovation? Open creative channels companywide, say Peter Skarzynski and Rowan Gibson, business strategists and authors of the new book "Innovation to the Core."

To reach the core:

Spread the wealth. Bring innovation to every workstation, the authors urge. Instead of simply encouraging workers to be creative, give them tools to "stretch their thinking and develop new perspectives," Skarzynski and Gibson wrote. Make innovation an "all-the-time, everywhere" process.

Learn from others. Whirlpool (WHR) blends information technology with software like Innovation E-Space to help workers exchange ideas, assist each other on creative projects worldwide and learn innovation principles from experts.

"The system has had hundreds of thousands of hits from Whirlpool's (global work force) and has become indispensable to the way people share ideas," the authors noted.

Workers not only connect with each other, but also can contact local mentors to help reach goals.

Let 'em stretch. Other tools range from instant messaging to Web conferencing and platforms such as Microsoft's (MSFT) Sharepoint 14d IBM (IBM)/Lotus' Workplace.

Add blogs and intranets, and the question becomes: Why aren't more firms linking workers worldwide to boost innovation?

Be democratic. In many firms, innovation's left to the brass. If ideas come from a senior exec, they get a "free pass," the authors noted. If they come from ordinary workers, they get yawns.

When using intranets and other systems, the goal should be to level the playing field. No one should know "whether the idea is coming from a senior executive or an hourly employee," and all ideas should get equal play, they wrote.

Measure and reward. Unless innovation's built into a firm's metrics and reward system, new ideas don't mean much.

"CEOs might preach the need for risk taking and rule breaking, but these aren't the metrics typically used for measuring managers' performance," the authors wrote.

Until that changes, firms will have online suggestion boxes that are overflowing -- and ignored.

"Innovation doesn't take off inside an organization until managers (realize) they're being measured and rewarded based on the health of their innovation pipeline," Gibson and Skarzynski wrote.

Blend it. Combine impatience with persistence, the authors advise. The first question should be: "How soon can we turn ideas into money?" The answer should be tempered with determination, "because experimentation and learning take time." That level of persistence is often lacking, says innovation guru Clay Christensen.

Set bold targets. "No company outperforms its aspirations," Gibson and Skarzynski wrote. "The beliefs of your employees set the upper limit on what's possible. If your expectation for top-line growth is pinned to the industry average," you'll get average performance. If you set "unreasonable growth targets," you'll make strides you never thought possible.

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