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| <p>Evolution is a concept that has been in the background of our existence for centuries. It carries different meanings in different circles, but normally suggests a gradual transformation or positive adaptation to improve the chances for survival or quality of life. In fact, the Encarta Dictionary defines evolution as "the gradual development of something into a more complex or better form."</p> <p>Our species and society have operated in an evolutionary mode for centuries. We now find the slight addition of the letter "r" changing the tone for the future. Yes, revolution is more descriptive of the pace of change we see for the years to come. That pace of change feeds off itself as new technology enables new possibilities.</p> <p>In this column, we've been examining the strategies and best practices that will help us adapt and thrive in this new operating mode. It is about becoming a more agile enterprise and developing a new leadership paradigm to operate with success. We've been discussing the five core drivers of organizational agility noted in the Agile Model. As one of these core focuses, liberating thinking is a survival and leadership skill necessary in agile organizations.</p> <p>The Nature of Reinvention</p> <p>"The only dependable competitive advantage you have today is a superior capacity to reinvent your business model before circumstances force you to do so," says Harvard professor Gary Hamel. This notion of continual reinvention is one of the absolute keys to business success today.</p> <p>Ask anyone who has been responsible for running a business or supplying consumer products to retailers such as Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Target or JCPenney, and they'll tell you that you'd better be inventing your next innovation even before you've launched your latest innovation on the retail floor. Retailers and consumers have an insatiable appetite for new, better and faster products, generally at lower prices.</p> <p>How can we survive with this expectation for continuous change and reinvention? The real question to answer is how you'll survive if you do not create the culture and expectation in your organization for this kind of fresh, innovative thinking.</p> <p>Indeed, the world has become flat, as Thomas Friedman describes in his best-selling book. We see new ideas and better products coming from all corners of the world. One of these days, we might even see them coming from beyond our planet.</p> <p>The Power of Liberated Thinking</p> <p>The value of creating an engaged workforce with suggestion boxes and idea farms has been taught in business schools and conference rooms for decades. Yet we still do not see the widespread adoption of liberated-thinking cultures throughout business in the U.S.</p> <p>Yes, there are many isolated examples of companies trying new things. Even IBM Corp. recently received acclaim for some of its new efforts to harness the power of liberated thinking throughout its vast organization. The company has initiated a new and clever collaborative problem-solving and innovation system that links its thousands of associates together through the power and convenience of technology to focus collective energy on real-time solutions to chronic issues.</p> <p>In its 2006 Global CEO Study, IBM discovered that the No. 1 critical roadblock to successful innovation is an unsupportive culture and climate. The flipside also applies — the primary enabler to successful innovation is a supportive culture and leadership climate. When we expect, recognize and reward fresh, innovative thinking, we tend to get more of it.</p> <p>The reality of our times is the idea of constant demand for new solutions as the bar gets raised and new expectations rule. Organizations that create the expectation and permission for all levels of employees to participate in the innovation process will reap the rewards in the long run.</p> <p>I recently attended a panel discussion that included John Cawthron, the 64-year-old chairman and CEO of TIMCO Aviation Services in Greensboro. The cigar-chomping turnaround specialist from Waco, Texas, shared some of his priorities from when he was asked to come lead this major player in the aircraft maintenance arena. He spoke of his efforts to meet with employees on all three shifts across their locations, and to put in place a genuine appeal for employees to offer up their ideas and suggestions so that the company could become better and stronger.</p> <p>As it turns out, at least one employee was listening and sent him an e-mail with an idea so simple yet so elegant that it saved the company approximately \$900,000 per year. It was a blind flash of the obvious once they thought it through, but they granted the long-time female employee 5 percent of the savings — or \$45,000 — for surfacing the issue and solution. The company then split the remaining savings between itself and Boeing Co., its beneficiary customer.</p> <p>That demonstrates a commitment to creating a climate inviting fresh thinking, as well as a respect for employees and the relationship among strategic customers. It is that kind of culture that will define winners in the future.</p> <p><i>Written by Tom O'Shea, CMC. Tom O'Shea, a certified management consultant and former president of the Carolinas Chapter of the Institute of Management Consultants, is a principal with Dr. Nick Horney of Agility Consulting & Training LLC, Greensboro. He can be reached at tom@agilityconsulting.com.</i></p> | | <p>Marketplace</p>       |
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