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Organisational And Systems Investments Within Services That Can Stimulate Beneficial Innovations

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Intentional Innovation; Innovation Need Not Be Something That Is Dependent On Serendipity

While it is most certainly true that many insights leading to innovation may arise unbidden and seemingly are “unplanned”, it is much more likely that positive innovations eventually emerge because they are actively being sought. Frequently, this will come about due to motives that have their roots in dissatisfactions with the status quo that precipitate intense scrutiny regarding how many matters of substance are currently managed. This disquiet can both consciously and unconsciously engage our minds and attention and begin a search process for better answers than the ones available at a given moment. This engagement may even carry over into sleep as the unconscious mind continues to work away at a problem, albeit below the level of our conscious awareness. Many of what be called “intuitive flashes” may actually be the consequence of an initial engagement with the problem that seemed to need innovative answers.

Innovation As A Product Of Innovative People

One could get the impression from some sources that positive innovations directly arise from organisations and systems and their various machinations. However, bureaucratic abstractions cannot in themselves create or innovate, as this is a capacity enjoyed principally and fundamentally by humans. Consequently, no organization or system can be innovative unless it has people within it that possess the various personal gifts that might, in an overall sense, be called “innovation mindedness”. Even with such people present, it may still be possible that the organization might fail to facilitate innovation if these human capacities are not properly harnessed and supported.

Typically, all innovations will have their beginnings in the way that a person reframes and resolves a problem. This fresh or innovative perspective is hugely people dependent insofar as the problem will not resolve itself without the presence of people with authentic innovation ability. It is people who will have to ultimately have to have what it takes to generate a compelling innovation and there is nothing organizational in nature that can substitute for this ingredient, though there are many who still may believe that things like funding, policy, slogans and whatnot bring about innovation, but they are usually rather quickly revealed as ineffectual.

Beneficial Innovations Will Require Adherence To Ethics And Values That Uphold Human Dignity And Well-Being

It is quite possible for many innovative developments to have perverse consequences for human beings if there is no attempt made to test innovations against some standard of what is good for people. For instance, one sees many genuinely innovative forms of torture, yet the context and use of

the human ingenuity involved is harmful and degrading to people and society. For this reason it is important to evaluate all innovations, not merely from the basis of their originality, but more fundamentally from the vantage point of whether they are in accord with how people should be treated in the most positive sense. In human service contexts, this would normally have to revolve around whether their enduring effect on service users is wholesome and beneficial.

Modern human services have, from their origin, engaged in all manner of experiments, usually in the name of human benefit, that have often had perverse results for the people that were their experimental subjects. Equally, where innovations have been responsibly conceived of and carried out with rigorous attention to their ultimate consequences for service users, there have been many advances for which we need to be grateful. Even more to the point, if we do not pay enough attention to crafting beneficial innovations for and with service users, then many needs will go un-addressed, and at a cost to the life potential and best interests of service users. Thus, it is quite helpful to consider how this might be done more systematically and with careful consideration.

The Types Of Organizational Investments That May Eventually Yield Innovative Results

It is axiomatic that simply waiting for innovation to occur “naturally” would be an inferior strategy of innovation facilitation and cultivation, in comparison to one that created an intentional array of mutually reinforcing innovation catalysts. For this reason, it is useful to consider the many points that follow as being potential components for a multi-path investment strategy that could be adopted by sufficiently motivated and resolved organizations. Naturally, the thoroughness with which these are pursued would greatly influence the quality of the outcomes that might eventually be attained. Innovation must be earned, much as any other advance, and there must be an acceptance that a relation will exist between the adequacy of the investment made and the yield that can be expected.

- **Attracting Proven Innovators With High Values Integrity**

While it is vitally important to recruit, uphold and support people with prospective innovation potential, it is even more important that those with proven and well-tested histories of innovation serve as the core from which novices draw their leadership and character role models. Many organizational cultures suffer from an inhospitality to innovation talented persons, such that they drive such persons away, rather than attract and nurture them. In the case of values based innovations that might lead to principled organizational conduct it would mean the loss of people whose high levels of principles and integrity would serve as a key moral safeguard

for the organizations conduct. Naturally, it is equally possible to nurture, prize and search out values based innovators, so the question would be why this is not done.

- **Setting Innovation As An Enduring Goal And Priority**

It is inconceivable that innovation would receive the necessary support in most organizations that it would require if there were not a special resolve taken and reinforced repeatedly, from the highest levels that innovation was a genuine priority, worthy of organizational sacrifice to achieve. In setting innovation as a serious goal it would mean that it would have visible priority, be supported by meaningful talent and resources, have enduring organizational commitment and would attract noticeable and ongoing recognition from the organization. If its support were just lip service, then it is likely that the organization would support innovation sufficiently to make a difference in measurable innovation outcomes.

- **Creating Concrete Instances To Define What Innovations Are Most Needed By Service Users**

It is difficult to effectively use scarce innovation resources if there is not an acute sense of where innovations are most urgently and fundamentally needed by people. However, once these needs are more clearly appreciated, then it is increasingly feasible to begin directing attention and resources to these directions. This deliberate linking of service user interests to a deliberate and continuously updated innovation agenda helps link organizational priorities to actual human need. Obviously, all of this is predicated upon a scrupulous attention, reflection and analysis on what is or is not happening in people's lives and where innovation is therefore needed.

- **Developing Organizational Leaders That Can Bring Out The Best In Innovators**

It would be quite desirable that the managers in organizations and innovators share a common sense of purpose and urgency when it comes to advancing the organization's innovation agenda. Were they to differ, it is quite probable that very little would be achieved. Consequently, the attraction of innovation oriented and supportive leaders to an organization can be very adaptive in cementing a working partnership between potential innovators and key organizational leaders. This does not require that all leaders be involved in innovation, but rather that the ones that are best suited to collaborating with innovators seek and be assigned this task. There is much that has to be resolved well to get the relationship right between innovators and an organization and having the best leaders in place for this task greatly increases the prospect of a fruitful outcome.

- **Searching For Relevant Examples Of Needed Innovations**

Often, much can be achieved by closely studying innovations that already exist that may be pertinent to what is needed. These examples can serve as both a guide to the further evolution of innovations and as a stimulus for the kinds of core insights that form the basis of needed advances. It is also helpful to try to define existing or otherwise well known innovations that have already established a significant track record in terms of meeting unmet need. These innovations are often “out there”, but frequently go unnoticed or unappreciated, yet are well in advance of existing practice. So, the organization or system that seeks these out is usually amply rewarded, as there is always something “out there” that adds to what has been achieved by the organization thus far.

- **Exposure Of Potential Innovators To Innovative Thinking And Personalities**

The process of innovation is essentially a human developmental process and is consequently helped by educational and consciousness-raising supports such as contact with the thinking and people involved in innovations that are highly related to the kind that are needed. This means searching out such persons, evaluating their relevance to what is needed and important in people’s lives and defining then type of innovation that is precisely needed. This process of analysis helps focus energies where they will do their most good and allows for the devotion of prime energies to valid innovation priorities. It is often not possible, in advance, to be sure what precise advantages will most certainly flow from exposing potential innovators to already accomplished ones. Nonetheless, there will be advances, as such persons are ideally suited to learn from one another.

- **Consciously Challenging And Supporting Innovative People To Excel**

It is very helpful that innovative-minded people be deliberately encouraged to experiment in needed directions. This reinforces the importance of innovation, the value of the innovators to the process of achieving service quality and relevance, and the commitment of the organization to “getting down to business” in terms of innovations that actually change people’s lives for the better. It also makes real the necessity for innovators to step up to the challenge of formulating innovations that will have an enduring impact on people’s lives. Potential innovators could conceivably readily squander their inherent gifts with innovations that are trivial and inconsequential if they do not give some thought to the difference. So, a challenge must be present, not only for innovation, but more importantly highly relevant innovation.

- **The Convening Of Innovators To Act As Catalysts With Each Other**

It can be expected that innovators will act to challenge and stimulate each other. Often this can result in many unexpected avenues being pursued that might otherwise have been discounted. Creativity is not merely a singular virtue, as it can be raised to new levels through the experience of small work groups, think tanks and teams devoted to advancement. There is most certainly something in the dynamic of innovators coming together that pushes them to levels that might not otherwise have occurred. In this regard, the act of convening innovators might be thought of as innovation enhancement in the sense that the resulting innovations will likely be a step or two further along the line than might have been the case were they not convened in a deliberate and intentional catalytic sense.

- **Creating Experimental “Zones” Within Conventional Agencies Or Systems**

If there are not specifically fashioned “localities” or “places” in the cultures of organization or systems that permit the holding of dissident and “unapproved” views as to what constitutes better practice, then it is predictable that orthodoxies and dogmas will take precedence over other possibly advantageous ways to do things. It is useful that these enabling opportunities be created somewhat deliberately with a view to ensconcing innovators into well protected enclaves within and alongside existing systems that are properly constructed and nourished such that the innovators might flourish. The wisdom of doing this is that one can generate innovative results without the whole organization or system having to be innovative.

- **Protecting Innovations Until They Are Strong Enough To Survive**

Innovations may well need to be incubated as they go through the often mistake prone “trial and error” period of their evolution. Few innovations emerge as fully polished and thus may need to be protected and defended until such time as they become more persuasive, mature and compelling. In effect, this means a recognition that innovations may need to be planted, sprouted and appropriately cared for until they are suitable for harvest. Metaphors aside, this means bringing an intentionality and patience to bear on whatever developmental requirements may be necessary for innovations to emerge and evolve. Since innovations often take us into unknown territory, it may well mean a more open ended commitment to risk taking and learning than is typical in risk-averse environments.

- **Educating The Uninformed Or Undiscerning As To The Significance Of Important Innovations**

Innovations do not usually get adopted by most people until they can see their relevance and practicality. Hence, it is often quite useful to prepare the ground for the easier adoption of innovations by educating people as to why an particular innovation is important and what its ultimate benefits might be. This cultivating of insight into innovation may seem merely supplemental to the core task of generating innovations, but this would be unwise when seen in the light of the need to get useful innovation adopted as practice at some point. If it is too readily assumed that “innovations will speak for themselves” and thus generate their own adherents, this will prove to be quite delusional as the process may require more education and interpretation of the innovation than may be apparent to people who are already convinced about the inherent merit of the innovation. Innovations that threaten to overturn or disrupt long held patterns will most certainly have an even harder time finding acceptance.

- **Creating And Maintaining The Political, Ideological And Technical Constituencies For Needed Innovations**

Innovators do not exist in a vacuum. They are as constrained by constituencies and vested interests as much as anyone else. By the same measure, their creative capacities are much helped and unleashed by the presence of supporters. Often, the politics of creating the support for innovations and an innovation agenda gets overlooked as a crucial part of the eventual outcome. Yet, eventual success is contingent not only on the validity and applicability of the innovation, but also whether people are resolved to support its potential. Innovations without backers are implementive orphans up until a constituency commits to it. Naturally, the more constituencies that show themselves in favour, the easier the transition from speculation into decision. Additionally, the process of getting them to “yes”, might also mean keeping them in “yes” if the trials and tribulations of innovation prove to be too demanding.

- **The Devotion Of Sufficient Fiscal And Other Resources Toward Innovation**

It has always been the case that one gets nothing for nothing. So it is with innovation. There will always be a need to divert some of the resources of an organization, including non-cash assets such as time, talent and goodwill to supporting the work of innovation. Such an investment can certainly bring about returns to an organization, though rarely in any short-term way, given the necessity to build quality solutions carefully. Not surprisingly, this requirement that innovation be supported beyond mere lip service will often be a test for those who are proponents of innovation since

diverting crucial resources will often need compelling justification. Should the proponents not be up to the task of justifying why resources should be committed, then the failure to succeed in convincing people might well illuminate weaknesses in addressing the political and technical challenges inherent in having innovation survive as a key element of organizational life.

- **Capitalizing On The Success Of Already Proven Innovations To Further The Innovation Agenda**

It is certainly advantageous to use the precedent of prior innovations and their eventual demonstrable utility, to make the case for the potential of as yet unproven innovations. This also part of the process of building an “innovation culture” that reflexively tolerates a lot of short term setbacks as being part of the long-term process of trial, error and innovation. It is very reassuring to the uneasy to know that prior attempts at innovation had eventually yielded good fruits and that their pathway had also had its share of setbacks and even defeats. This speaks to the confidence and credibility challenges that face all innovations, as they have to ultimately dislodge something that people are very comfortable with even if it is ineffective. So, being able to point to successes with prior innovations helps build faith in innovation itself, independent of the relative merits of specific innovations.

- **Linking Internal Innovators To The Supportive Networks Of External Innovators**

Not surprisingly, many innovators look to their “peers” for affirmation, support and inspiration. Often these peers may be outside the organization and even perhaps at great distances from them. Nonetheless, they typically share deep passions for their work or subject and quite naturally seek out the company and stimulation of like-minded people. Supporting these networks reduces their isolation and brings them into contact with often the only people who can really challenge and excite them at the level of substance. This also acts as a kind of collective catalyst, since the interactions of innovators with each other helps raise the bar in terms of the eventual quality of innovation and push them to go further. Additionally, it helps with motivation, affirmation, critical evaluation, fresh insights and angles on a problem and assistance sorting out “the wheat from the chaff”.

- **Increasing The Appetite For “Significance” In Innovation**

Innovations can be minor or significant in the impact they can have. The higher the quality and relevance of an innovation, the more value it has. Helping people discover what would constitute even greater degrees of

“significance” in innovation, helps them define and achieve “better”. Not being clear as to what constitutes “better” makes it less likely that people will achieve as much in terms of the quality of their innovations. Sometimes this can be helped by exposing people to exceptional examples of innovative achievement, as does the creation of occasions to critique and evaluate innovations. Significance discussions are a very valuable safeguard for people to question precisely what is and is not of meaning and value in a given innovation as well as aiding the process of discerning just precisely how much faith and confidence one should place in a given innovation.

- **Maintaining An Atmosphere Of Challenge To Unthinking Practice And Thinking**

The culture of innovation is one in which there needs to be a great deal of questioning of “status quo” assumptions or other apparent “givens”. It is through the ability to look at practices with new eyes that the much vaunted “paradigm shifts” become possible. Therefore, innovation is less likely to arise if people are punished for challenging practice and for introducing unfamiliar ways of seeing things. On the contrary, being contrary may actually be a safeguard, properly contextualized, if it helps people escape the many traps of group thinking, lazy conformity, superficiality and many other distractions from genuinely original thinking. Creating this kind of mindfulness, can be very hard to do if organizational leadership are themselves trapped in and much too deferential to respectability and social approval.

- **Celebrating And Recognizing Innovators And Innovations**

Innovators are people like everyone else and therefore will normally respond quite well to being appreciated and valued, just as they will diminish in the face of hostility, derision and other detractors to their work. Thus, there is good sense in taking the time to recognise their contributions and to show a sense of how their efforts are valued. This demonstration of appreciation need not be elaborate or expensive, as many people simply want to have their contributions noted and valued. Should they not receive it after many efforts to excel, then it is understandable that they may leave seeking more hospitable environs. Driving out innovators is a destructive strategy, but the world offers many examples of how this error is so short sighted. On the other hand, when people feel that they are doing something of merit and significance and that others value and celebrate this, it is hard to walk away.

Innovation, Looking Ahead And The Question Of Human Needs

We often cannot see the value of innovations in the present because we are usually so caught up in surviving the many responsibilities of the moment.

Consequently, it is only by stepping back, and looking ahead, that we can bring perspective to bear on what might be important for us to do. This can take on a greater urgency in organizations founded upon service to others to reflect upon whether or not the people being served are properly aided by today's patterns of working. If their lives seem unchanged by what we now do, then perhaps our strategies are not as successful as we would have hoped or imagined. If so, it may well be that this very lack of success is the proper spur to get us to innovate in ways that might be more beneficial to the lives of the people. Innovation for its own sake is trivial in comparison to innovation that benefits people and their lives. Hence, our unease with today's self-evident orthodoxies may well be the beginning of fruitful innovation.