

June 2004

Nurturing ideas in the workplace

If you are ever visiting Detroit, take the chance to spend a day at the Henry Ford Museum in Greenfield Village. Ford, the man who once described history as "more or less bunk", was in fact a passionate preserver and collector of social artefacts.

This being the US, the museum is more than a series of glass-fronted cases. Ford liked to collect buildings: a church here, a school there, the odd antebellum mansion, patiently dismantled and re-erected on the museum's 90-acre site.

Ford's proudest exhibit, however, was a replica - that of Menlo Park Laboratory, Thomas Edison's New Jersey workshop. Menlo Park was responsible, in the space of six frenetic years between 1876 and 1882, for - among other inventions - the phonograph, the telephone carbon transmitter, improvements to the telegraph, and electric lighting.

Yes, it was all a long time ago, but Edison's organisation is a remarkable model for focusing human ingenuity on the development of technological improvements that created tangible benefits to society. His collaborators were craftsmen and artisans who called each other "muckers" in recognition of the way they all mucked in to help each other.

Most of them were single young men, living in a nearby boarding house (also now preserved at the museum) and sharing Edison's commitment to investigate the potential of electricity as a power source. They worked long hours, often late into the night, stopping occasionally for sessions of drinking and singing around the organ at the end of the room. It was an informal, collegiate arrangement. "Hell, there ain't no rules in here. We're trying to accomplish something!" said Edison at the time.

I could not help picturing this during a short seminar in London recently, organised by the Brathay Forum, part of the Brathay Hall Trust, a Cumbria-based educational and training charity. The forum was discussing ways to improve innovation and creativity in the modern workplace. Innovation is a buzzword these days; the government is all for it and companies also seek it to revitalise their businesses.

But the corporate experience of innovation does not tend to run smoothly. Once a business is up and running, the need to service demanding production, distribution and sales cycles can relegate concerns for stimulating creativity.

The problem with innovation is that it is often sparked by thinking or ideas that occur outside daily working routines. Edison himself was fired from his job as a telegrapher at Western Union "for not concentrating on his primary responsibilities and doing too much moonlighting". The problem was that his bosses paid him to be a telegrapher whereas Edison was never happier than when he had the opportunity to experiment with ways of improving the technology.

Of course, his knowledge and research disciplines would have been worth millions of dollars to Western Union but it would have been difficult to explain this to the hard-pressed supervisor of a telegraphy department. It was difficult then and it remains difficult today.

There are many ways to stimulate workplace innovation, as Mark Brown, a visiting professor at Henley Management College, pointed out at the seminar. Much of his work, he says, involves trying to establish some balance in business between creative impulses and the need for structure and rules. Some young companies have too little structure. He also observed that too much innovation would be inappropriate for some activities.

"You don't want staff to be thinking about continuous improvement and innovation when landing a passenger aircraft. You want it to be landed safely and expertly every time."

On the other hand, says Prof Brown, "idea assassination" has become a favourite bloodsport in some companies. This is a fundamental problem for creativity consulting, no matter how good the processes available in the marketplace. While there are plenty of people at the top of large companies who understand the need for innovation, there will always be a tension between this need and the daily operational demands of the business.

This is why so many well-organised and well-intentioned suggestion schemes often founder. I recall one in which the boss, who was backing the scheme, managed to generate some good ideas from an initially sceptical workforce. Then he was promoted to the main board and replaced by a new boss who allowed the scheme to wither away, and with it any residual goodwill among staff towards suggestions schemes.

As one contributor to the Brathay seminar put it, "You can infect companies with ideas for a time but they tend to have strong immune systems that soon respond to get rid of creative thinking."

So how can companies avoid this immune reaction? One way, said Margaret Exley of Mercer Delta, the consultants hosting the forum, was to nurture a new project in a protected environment away from the parent.

"When the Prudential set up Egg, the financial services business, the top team made sure that the people working in Egg were completely protected and kept out of reach of the rest of the business," she said.

The same lesson, she said, was learnt by Royal/Dutch Shell when the company created a protective nursery for innovation in which projects were nurtured outside the normal corporate processes and systems.

Sometimes, she said, the same kind of protection needed to be extended to individual employees. She recalled a physicist employed by the Atomic Energy Authority. Managers regarded him as a maverick but they understood his potential worth which rewarded their judgment. He saved the authority millions of pounds when it was faced with a serious problem in one of its reactors.

"If you are looking for a big fundamental change in any system it's not a good idea to work in that system. It is far better to create a microcosm and to protect it," said Ms Exley.

While companies such as the Prudential have demonstrated the effectiveness of such strategies, employees embarking on any new business within the confines of a larger company should be wary. It only takes a change at the top or a corporate take-over and the protective arrangement can disappear overnight. For some, the only

sure way to make the best of a big idea is to go it alone.

Not all innovations , however, are big ideas. And even when they are small - such as improvements in working practices - they can be resisted by employees as effectively as new ideas can be resisted by sceptical managers. The best way to achieve such changes may be to introduce innovation in small graduated steps.

Of course, in workplaces that happily resemble the Edison organisation, such approaches are likely to be less important. The great man knew all about this. So if you want to see real innovation , you could start in a museum.

©2004 Richard Donkin. All rights reserved