Creating High Performing Teams

The Role of the Innovation Environment, Domain Expertise and their Combined Impact on the Event Management Response Process

October 2011

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"Innovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship…that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth."

Peter Drucker, Consultant, Author

Drucker's definition of entrepreneurship, noted above, is an excellent one since it implies that innovators see the same resources as all of us but have the vision to recombine them in new ways to generate advances. The key is how to "see" the opportunities and how quickly you can try different recombinations. I do believe that the secret to a good idea is a lot of ideas. So the key here is to facilitate as many ideas from anywhere as often as possible with the minimum of cost and then screen the ideas to find the gems.

Learning and innovation are deeply related human activities. There has been some fascinating research on how humans learn and what the most efficient learning method is. It turns out that discussing issues over the camp fire is a remarkably efficient learning methodology. This is commonly called the narrative. Research has revealed the narrative to be very effective because it translates information, context, and values in a single package; these are the necessary ingredients if learning is to be transformational. Narrative also conveys the dynamic relationship of knowledge elements as they shift, given the altered contexts during the narrative.

We know that the human brain is very good at pattern recognition and not very good at information processing. We also know that there is a tremendous difference between tacit knowledge (what's in your head) and explicit knowledge (what is recorded somewhere). Research has documented that:

- We know more then we tell
- We tell more than we write down
- The relationship of knowledge elements that get written down is not the same as the relationships that are in the speaker's head. They are much more dynamic in the speaker's mind than what is typically recorded.

The paradox is that the most common knowledge transfer mechanism is the written page.

Having the right method to learn is critical but not critical enough to create high performing teams. The culture and environment is also essential. Some common elements have come to light in these studies and research into creative organizations and projects. Creative organizations and teams commonly demonstrate many of the following traits:

- Creative discontent with current situation
- Tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity
- Cross fertilization of ideas from different fields of knowledge

- Willingness to take risks and a strong culture of experimentation; constantly trying and testing small improvements
- Participation in richly connected social networks
- Questioning accepted knowledge; testing and searching for true cause and effect
- Reversing a process; willingness to examine problems from many perspectives
- Culture of learning

Business in the next century will be dominated by the fastest innovators. Innovation—the culture that supports it, and the tools that facilitate it—will be one of the key executive initiatives and the focus of winning strategies going forward. Hiring the right people will not be enough; getting them to think about the right things in the right context will be paramount. Video is fast becoming the primary knowledge transfer mechanism of this era. The reason for this is that the information density of video is orders of magnitude higher than the written page because it provides context and values, through body language and facial expressions, and environmental content as in the case of video directly on the production floor, lab, or building site.

Domain Expertise

The frequency of innovation comes from the fertile ground of domain expertise. The secret of domain expertise is that it comes from both tacit or experiential learning as well as formal learning. Often the most valuable knowledge comes from tacit knowledge, the knowledge of the many contributing elements that create a true understanding of the situation.

A great case study that proves the point is the Wright Brothers' development of the powered aircraft or heavier-than-air flight. In order to accomplish the goal of powered flight, the Wright Brothers had to develop extensive domain knowledge in many areas that were not really considered part of the domain knowledge for aircraft design at that time. Many of the innovations in these supporting elements are more remarkable than the flight at Kitty Hawk. They developed:

- One of the first wind tunnels where they discovered that the accepted wing profiles and pressure tables were not correct. This lead to the blunt leading edge wing design
- The first propeller that was modeled after the concept that a propeller is a moving wing
- Cast aluminum internal combustion engine because the existing cast iron engines were too heavy

In the 21st century the domain expertise for complex product development can be daunting. The technology and core competence for each element of the system might come from many different suppliers so the "fire side" chats needed to integrate these innovations into a working system can be very complex without the ability to immediately see all the problems in context and share that common understanding with the key innovators.

Video supports these tacit knowledge transfers placing issues in context and facilitates teamwork with common value systems in a similar way that the 10,000-year-old narrative did for our ancestors around the camp fires.

Event Management Process

A typical Event Management or problem analysis process is depicted figure 1. In many situations each step is accomplished very quickly or takes days depending on the complexity of the situation and the resources at risk. The process can be simplified into the three major steps that follow:

1. Problem Characterization or data collection phase – steps 1-4
2. Learning or Analysis – steps 5-7
3. Decision Process – steps 8-10

Figure 1

When we talk about faster decisions we don't always think about the whole process that is involved. Effective decisions are the end result of a more complex process. When the problem is characterized as the three-step process in figure 1, the quality of the data and analysis greatly affects the quality or affectivity of the decisions. The "speed" comes into play is when it becomes much easier to get the right information and have the right people analyze that information or data. So the key is not so much how fast you can make a decision, anyone can make a snap decision, but how fast you can get relevant data, sort through and understand it, and then make a decision that truly has the buy-in and cooperation of the whole team—this is what generates real organizational change. This process is often seen in High Performing Teams. It is a well known fact that if there is little buy-in to a decision, implementation has a greatly reduced probability of success. Therefore the other key value proposition for these analytical environments is bridging the gap between decision(s) and real implementation.

The Aberdeen Group completed a study of 140 companies in 2009 that implemented video collaboration. The study wanted to understand the business impact of this technology on the product development process. From the data in figure 2, video's beneficial impact for all classes of users is easily recognizable, but best-in-class companies enjoy a significantly reduced time to market. This is especially true for the time needed to evaluate new ideas. If this data is viewed with the Event Management process described above, it can be easily understood how impactful this technology can be on both the number of ideas accessed and the number reviewed to screen out the best. This 3X advantage over industry average performers will build significant competitive advantage over time. One characteristic of best-in-class teams is that they access expertise outside their enterprise twice as often as industry average users. Video greatly simplifies access to a greater knowledge pool in suppliers, customers, and domain experts.
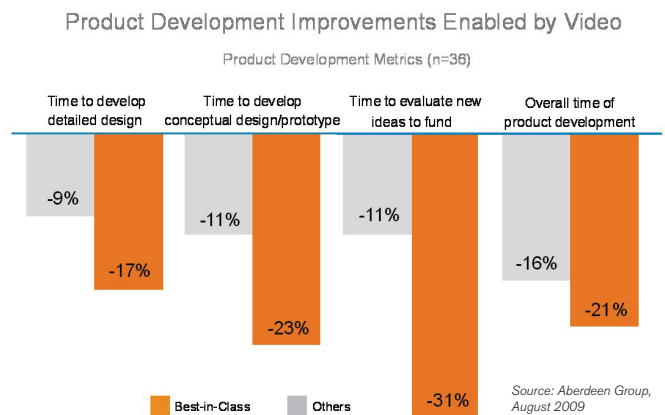

Figure 2

Immersive Collaboration

Immersive Collaborative Work Environment (CWE) solutions help to develop high-performing teams; extending the real-time reach for relevant data, access to experts worldwide to support in-depth analysis which further leads to high-quality decisions that have the buy-in of all the stakeholders. This, in turn, leads to rapid implementation of improvements, cost reductions, and greater competitive advantage. In short, Collaborative Work Environments become your Innovation Engine.

About the Author

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John Paul Williams' executive experience includes global operations leader with P&L responsibility leading innovations in manufacturing, quality and engineering. His Industry experience includes telecommunications, process controls, military avionics, consumer goods, and medical equipment.

About Polycom

Polycom is the global leader in standards-based unified communications (UC) solutions for telepresence, video, and voice powered by the Polycom® RealPresence™ Platform. The RealPresence Platform interoperates with the broadest range of business, mobile, and social applications and devices. More than 400,000 organizations trust Polycom solutions to collaborate and meet face-to-face from any location for more productive and effective engagement with colleagues, partners, customers, and prospects. Polycom, together with its broad partner ecosystem, provides customers with the best TCO, scalability, and security—on-premises, hosted, or cloud delivered.

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