

What Your Best Supporters Won't Tell You

By Stephen C. Rafe

Here's a proven way to keep your organization at the forefront of change.

Thinking about adding a new service? Considering changes in what you currently offer? Don't ask your best customers. In fact, don't even bother to ask your most loyal staff and board members for their opinions.

Why? Because your most valued customers are satisfied with the status quo. They're important to the organization because they like what they're getting. If you ask them, they're not likely to advocate, endorse, or even support any major changes you have in mind — at least not at first. And your top staff and board members don't want change either. They're committed to serving current needs. In today's fast-paced society, this resistance to change could spell doom to your organization.

Resistance to Change Is the Norm

Aristotle said that the heavier the object, the faster it would fall. For centuries, the world accepted his thesis, unchallenged. After all, who would question Aristotle, the greatest thinker of all time?

It wasn't until 2,000 years later that Galileo challenged the theory, in 1589. He went to the top of the Tower of Pisa and simultaneously pushed a ten-pound weight and a one-pound weight off the edge. A select group of scholars watched at the bottom as both weights landed at the same time. However, their belief in Aristotle's so-called wisdom was so profound, they refused to acknowledge what they'd seen.

Understand Revolutionary vs. Evolutionary Change

Your organization's most loyal supporters are the least comfortable with revolutionary changes. They're somewhat

“**Hire for innovation, asking interview questions that identify creative personalities.**”

more comfortable with evolutionary changes — ones that involve modifying current products or services — but they aren't eager to depart from what they're used to getting. And yet organizations that explore the potential of revolutionary innovations have the best chance for success.

So, if satisfied customers and loyal board and staff members aren't the right ones to ask about revolutionary innovations, where can you turn? How can you prepare your organization for future markets while continuing to address present customers' needs? The answer is an innovations team.

Create an Innovations Team

To stay ahead of the competition, you need a team that thinks the way new organizations with totally innovative services do. Team members can't be encumbered with the baggage of the past, or even of “what works.” Their style needs to border on what others may see as approaching disloyalty. They need to view tradition as an impediment to future success. Most of all, they need to be distanced from those who advocate preservation and resist change. They must be encouraged to become possibility thinkers. This begins with adopting an attitude that focuses on what's possible rather than what's been done.

How do you find such people? One way is to hire for innovation, asking interview questions that identify creative, open-minded, explorative personalities. Another is to look at current workers and pinpoint those who're constantly testing boundaries, asking: Why? Why do it this way? Why not that way?

Members of your innovations team need to be independent thinkers who aren't swayed by self-defeating phrases such as “We've always done it like this” and “That will never work.” On the

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other hand, they need to maintain open communication at all levels of the organization.

Once you've gathered your team members, charge them with these responsibilities:

- **Consider** how the organization has already responded with innovations.
- **Anticipate** future markets related to your organization's core mission.
- **Pay attention** to what the market is saying it wants, and note how this differs from what's available. Define these expressed needs further, and assess their long-term potential.
- **Monitor** innovators in your organization's field — and in related fields. Study those who are doing things in non-traditional ways. Know who they are, whom they attract, and with whom their influence is growing.
- **Examine** the potential impact of both revolutionary and evolutionary innovations as they relate to your organization's goals.
- **Communicate** actively with leading-edge thinkers.
- **Recommend** actions that will keep your organization at the forefront of its field.

What's Your Role?

If your innovations team is to succeed, you need to provide them with encouragement and support. No one in the organization will be receptive to your team members' insights unless it's clear that you're behind them one hundred percent.

So inspire your task force members, and motivate them to be creative. Meet with them whenever they have something new or interesting to report. Listen without being judgmental. In conversations, ask them to interpret and translate what

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“Study those who are doing things in non-traditional ways.”

they've found or believe might be happening. Approach each new idea through the concept of possibility thinking. With courage and leadership, your organization may be the one that launches the next revolutionary innovation that transforms our world.



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