

The Innovation Mindset

By Joe Whitefield

How much of your facilities management business could be described as innovative? Innovative organizations are constantly engaged in a continuous improvement process that produces beneficial changes to their business practices. Innovation in the form of best practices can be found in work practices, accounting and billing services, customer service, communications, employee relations, etc. When I come across the innovative practices of others, I often want to adopt the same practices for my organization. More than the best practices themselves, the organizational mindset for innovation is what should be adopted.

In addition to leading to organizational improvements, an innovation-oriented environment engages employees in creative thinking activities that can open avenues of communication and foster teamwork and cooperation. The creative environment is more fun, less mundane, and just better than the alternative. So let's break it down a little.

Innovation occurs when an idea is discovered and essentially forged into an executable practice that effectively meets a need or provides a new opportunity for the organization. Innovative organizations typically display a strong commitment to some form of the innovative process. The innovative process has three key components:

SELF AWARENESS

Self awareness is a deep, realistic understanding of your present condition. This would include expectations of your organization, the capabilities (strengths and weaknesses) of your systems and people, the constraints that are present,

important history, and relevant cultural and political issues. It also encompasses an element of vision where you forecast where you could be or would like to be.

Self-awareness is often an overlooked component of innovation. This is important in that it requires organizations to identify their needs and their opportunities for improvement so they can, first, know what types of innovations to explore, and second, recognize a good idea/practice when they see one.

Keep in mind there are a lot of good ideas and best practices – still, one size does not fit all. It is incumbent upon the facilities manager to identify and incorporate those that are feasible and best for his or her organization. Self-awareness provides the template.

IDEA MINING

Most innovation begins with a really good or interesting idea. Ideas are the raw materials of innovation. They exist in abundance – especially with the technology of today. Idea mining is a *process* (as informal as it may be) of searching for ideas and identifying those that have the best application opportunities and chances for success.

Where should you look for ideas? The simple answer is practically everywhere. The chances of finding a good or great idea increase with the number of ideas reviewed. The trade-off is the need to quickly and efficiently sort and filter the ideas leaving only the best ones for consideration. This calls for broadening the search but narrowing the focus.

Look within our industry. Reviewing the best practices of other institutions similar to ours reveals instant ideas to improve our operations. The caution is that

C Completion
O Organization
I Innovation
N Being Nice

if we benchmark only those institutions most similar to ours we could miss out on some of the best ideas and innovative practices. Consider the other institutions that have a different profile than ours but perhaps have a more developed program in your area of interest. Also, look to institutions that have a similar (or deeper) motivation for the area of interest. An institution that has more at stake (deeper need) is more likely to have good ideas and well thought-out practices.

Look outside our industry. The different perspectives from other forms of business can yield surprising results for educational facilities. Hospitals, manufacturing, volunteer-oriented organizations, retail, hospitality--they all run operations and serve customers. Again organizational motivation and experiences lead to new thinking and innovation.

When do you look for ideas? The simple answer always and before is before it is too late. Need and opportunity are great motivators – desperation is not. Keeping your eyes and ears open continuously for ideas will allow you to recognize opportunities for improvement in incremental ways. Waiting too late paints an organization into a corner leading to reactionary decision making and too much reliance on breakthrough performance and super-accelerated results.

FORGING BEST PRACTICE

Ideas must be converted into an executable initiative, project, or practice. This process takes the raw idea, evaluates and builds a process or practice around it that allows it work effectively for the organization. This is the part that organizations often pay too little attention to. It is easy to adopt an entire best practice from another organization and implement it without adapting it to the constraints/requirements of the new environment. This is particularly true when benchmarking similar institutions within education. Differences in motivations, resources, personnel, culture, etc., can greatly impact the effectiveness of any initiative. Good ideas become poor practices when this occurs.

To combat this, ideas must be evaluated against the systems and cultures of the self-aware organization. To have a

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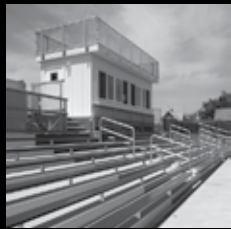
reasonable chance for success, practices must be developed around the ideas that specifically address need and align with the specific organization systems, structures, and ability to execute. One example is a financially strapped organizations desire to convert an innovative practice into a “poor man’s” version yielding most of the benefits at a fraction of the cost.

In summary, innovation and best practices are essential for organizational adaptation and success. Innovation begins with a mindset whereby a self-aware organization actively

searches for and discovers ideas that can be converted into best practices. Facilities organizations have as many needs and opportunities as ever. Technology makes ideas more available than ever. These factors should combine to make for a great time of innovation.

Get engaged by reading, networking, reading, attending conferences (in person or online), and most of all—reading. ☞

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