

Does Your Association Need an Innovation Audit?

By Jim Carroll

Is it time for an innovation audit within your association office and membership? Maybe so! After all, with membership challenges, rapidly changing skills requirements within your membership base, industry change and all kinds of other challenges in the future, you've got to make sure that you have an association and membership base that is open to new ideas, and innovative ways of turning challenge into opportunity.

Take the time to do this simple test to determine if your association and its members are in the right frame of mind for remarkably new and innovative things, or whether they and you are stuck in a rut, unable to respond and deal with the change that is swirling around you.

Here are the signs I would watch for. If you are guilty of more than a couple of these indicators, then you've got an organization that has a significant change anti-virus in place:

- people laugh at new ideas
- someone who identifies a problem is shunned
- innovation is the privileged practice of a special group
- the phrase, "you can't do that because we've always done it this way" is used for every new idea
- no one can remember the last time anyone did anything really cool
- people think innovation is just about R&D, and forget that it's also about the way things are done, and about deliverables
- the organization is focused more on process than success
- there are lots of baby boomers about, and few people younger than 30
- after any type of surprise -- product, market, industry or organizational change -- everyone sits back and asks, "wow, where did that come from?"

Innovative companies act differently. In these organizations:

- ideas flow freely throughout the organization
- subversion is a virtue
- success and failure are championed

- there are many, many leaders who encourage innovative thinking, rather than managers who run a bureaucracy
- there are creative champions throughout the organization -- people who thrive on thinking about how to do things differently
- ideas get approval and endorsement
- rather than stating "it can't be done," people ask, "how could we do this?"
- people know that in addition to R&D, innovation is also about ideas about how to "run the business better, grow the business and transform the business," an attitude that is equally applicable to associations
- the word "innovation" is found in most job descriptions as a primary area of responsibility, and a percentage of annual remuneration is based upon achievement of explicitly defined innovation goals

Every organization should work to develop innovation as a core virtue -- if they don't, they certainly won't survive the rapid rate of change that envelops us today.

How can you do this? With some 80 keynotes under my belt through the last year, many of which have focused on instilling an innovative culture, I've seen some of the best and worst approaches to innovation and creativity. Analyzing what I've seen, I've come up with a quick list of 10 more things that smart, innovative organizations do to create an overall sense of innovation-purpose.

- **Heighten the importance of innovation.** One major client with several billions in revenue has 8 senior VP's who are responsible for innovation. And the fact is, they don't just walk the talk -- they do it. The message to the rest of the company? Innovation is critical -- get involved. You can do the same thing by elevating specific responsibility to various committee or executive members.
- **Create a compelling sense of urgency.** With product lifecycles compressing, markets witnessing fierce competition, and entire skills and professions changing overnight, now is not the time for studies, committee meetings and reports. It's time for action. Simply do things. Now. Get it done. Analyze it later to figure out how to do it better next time.
- **Ignite each spark.** Innovative leaders know that everyone in the organization has some type of unique creativity and talent. They know how to find it, harness it, and use it to advantage.

- **Re-evaluate the mission.** You might have been selling widgets five years ago, but the market doesn't want widgets anymore. If the world has moved on, and you haven't, it is time to re-evaluate your purpose, goals and strategies. Rethink the fundamentals in light of changing circumstances. This is particularly important for associations in fast-moving industries.
- **Build up experiential capital.** Innovation comes from risk, and risk comes from experience. The most important asset today isn't found on your balance sheet -- it is found in the accumulated wisdom from the many risks that you've taken. The more experiential capital you have, the more you'll succeed.
- **Shift from threat to opportunity.** Innovative organizations don't have management and staff who quiver at the thought of what might be coming next. Instead, they're alive from breathing the oxygen of opportunity.
- **Banish complacency and skepticism.** It's all too easy for an organization, bound by a history of inaction, to develop a defeatist culture. Innovative leaders turn this around by motivating everyone to realize that in an era of rapid change, anything is possible.
- **Innovation osmosis.** If you don't have it, get it -- that's a good rule of thumb for innovation culture. One client lit a fuse in their innovation culture by buying up small, aggressive, young innovative companies in their industry. They then spent the time to carefully nurture their ideas and harness their creativity. You might be able to do the same type of thing with a merger with a similar, smaller and more innovative organization, or by seeking out some new, creative talent for your executive ranks.
- **Create excitement.** I don't know how many surveys I saw this year which indicated that the majority of most people in most jobs are bored, unhappy, and ready to bolt. Not at innovative organizations! The opportunity for creativity, initiative and purpose results in a different attitude. Where might your organization be on a "corporate happiness index?" If it's low, then you don't have the right environment. Fix that problem -- and fix it quick.

You need to do this soon. Sit back and think about how different the world is going to be five years from now - in a world of hyperchange, it will be very, very different. Is your association and its members in the right frame of mind to do what needs to be done to get there?

Jim Carroll's recent keynotes have focused on issues as diverse as global economic trends, China and offshoring, hyper-innovation, rapid market change, the skills crisis, shortened product lifecycles, managing Gen-Y, the future of health care, avoiding commoditization, and creating high performance, change oriented teams. Learn more at www.jimcarroll.com, or contact him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com.