

From Idle to Innovative: 8 Ways to Ignite Managers in the Middle

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2011 Wendy Schmidt Oil Cleanup X Challenge

The Cleanup X Challenge offered \$1 million to the team that could invent an oil-recovery system able to recover oil from the surface of the ocean at a rate two times the industry standard. The building and testing of such a device was already an improbable feat, but the stakes were raised even further: contestants have 90 days to complete it.

Team Elastec met the challenge

When Donald Wilson, the CEO of Elastec, the largest manufacturer of oil-spill-cleanup equipment in the US, read about the innovation contest, he enthusiastically jumped. They had toyed with a similar idea in the past, but shelved it due to a lack of resources and time. With the pressure on and Wilson's contagious passion, the company's 140 employees rallied and won the contest, beating 350 other contestants.

Innovation contests

Innovation contests like the Oil Cleanup X Challenge are designed to spur innovation. Netflix sponsored a \$1 million challenge for anyone who could devise an algorithm that improves its movie-recommendation system. Similarly, British tycoon Richard Branson continues to sponsor *The Virgin Earth Challenge*, a \$25 million prize to anyone who can demonstrate a design to reduce atmospheric pollution and contribute to the stability of the earth's climate.

Innovation can ignite or paralyze

When the opportunity to innovate arises, there are 2 influencing factors that compete for our motivation:

- (1) the herd, and
- (2) the need to matter

The herd's tendency to squelch innovation

We are all influenced by our herd. We conform to our herd, seek our herd's approval, and steer clear of being rejected by our herd. Who is in this herd? Anyone in our network – our family, friends, colleagues, boss, clients, and community. This herd poses huge risks to our innovation cravings. Because we fear being rejected by that herd, we literally stifle and suffocate many innovative ideas.

The need to matter drives innovation

Only when our need to matter overpowers our fear of rejection will we break away from the herd and suggest a novel approach, attempt a new method, or offer a fresh idea. We empower this need to

matter when we recognize that our efforts will make a difference. And the fastest route to making a difference is to innovate.

A lack of innovation fuels malcontent

Most malcontent managers were not born curmudgeons. They became that way because of years of watching nothing new happen. No changes, no new approaches, and no risk-taking. Instead, years of having their ideas shelved, hearing “no,” and getting “that’s just how we’ve always done it.” Years of not being able to make a difference.

The impact of innovation

While prize money is great, there are numerous benefits of promoting innovation internally. It accelerates product development, creates PR opportunities, and feeds the need to matter while alleviating the fear of rejection. On the Elastec Cleanup X Challenge team, employees instantly recognized the difference they were making not only to the chance of winning, but to the company’s product success, and to the environment. And along the way, their herd cheered.

8 Ways to Move Managers from Idle to Innovative

1. Create your own internal innovation contest.

Challenge managers to solve vexing problems by creating your own innovation contest. Team up your managers or require them to team up with their employees. When everyone in the herd is innovating, the fear of rejection quickly dissipates.

2. Seek out innovation contests for teams to enter.

Numerous organizations offer contests to stimulate innovation in areas that they feel passionate about. Find one and enter it like Elastec’s CEO. Here are a few organizations that regularly promote innovation contests:

- X Prize Foundation – sponsors challenges in aerospace and understanding the human genome
- InnoCentive.com – sponsors challenges in engineering, chemistry, and health care
- Kaggle.com – sponsors challenges in data-mining and predictive-modeling

3. Add innovation to team agendas.

Intentionally carve out time in each team meeting to present a problem that needs innovating. Experiment with different ways to stimulate their innovation, like those outlined below.

4. Incorporate brainstorming, brainwriting, and brainsteering to solve problems.

When brainstorming allows for too much influence of the herd, employ brainwriting (everyone writes ideas down) and brainsteering (everyone answers questions to guide the brainstorm) to elevate the effectiveness of innovation.

5. Schedule “idea time” with each manager.

Meet 1:1 with managers to hear their ideas. Take away the pressure of the herd and you will be surprised at the ideas they have brewing. And the special attention will feed their need to matter.

6. Organize “Innovation Groups” to address specific problems.

Assign managers to work together in Innovation Groups to devise new approaches and fresh ideas for a specific issue.

7. Launch Innovation Mentoring.

Match Mentors and Protégés for the purpose of guiding Protégés to innovate through problems they face in their current projects. Request your managers nominate those Mentors and Protégés.

8. Recognize new ideas formally.

Routinely (*monthly newsletter, quarterly meeting, yearly event*) recognize ideas that have been presented, attempted, and/or executed by people in the company. If an idea was not successful, recognize the courage to innovate and highlight the lessons learned.