

# Don't die of Innovation Indigestion!

I recently read an article from Mckinsey, by Dr. Waguih Ishak, the division vice president and chief technologist at Corning Research & Development Corporation. You can find the full article here:

<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/creating-an-innovation-culture> but I am referencing a portion of this piece. I encourage you to follow the link and read the rest.

He touches on an important point, and almost off handedly, hits another very critical point on the innovation journey. The quote I would like to focus on is this:

Conventional wisdom holds that organizations die of starvation from a shortage of good ideas and projects. In reality, they are much more likely to die of indigestion. A surfeit of projects with inadequate staffing makes delivering on anything less likely.

DR. WAGUIH ISHAK

I have participated in, and led innovation efforts at multiple large enterprises over my career. When I read this quote, it resonated so strongly I felt compelled to draft this short piece. What grabbed my attention on this, is the idea that many leaders (including myself) have focused on ways to bring innovation in to drive more demand through improved engagement models and “cultural change”. This is often seen and celebrated as part of transformational change to drive business value, and all the other clichéd terms we like to use.

In reality, there is often more to be gained in focusing on first principles – focusing on the hard work of understanding our teams, understanding what we need to be successful, listening to our people and giving them room to innovate and explore the ideas they already have. We seem to celebrate work over value, and so often I see the valuable “thinking time” being driven out of our days.

We have an opportunity to stop – look at our teams and prioritize thinking. Learn to get to know the people we have and probe them for what they would do if they were the leader. Then we can select the best ideas and get out of the way – empowerment and space are unbelievably powerful innovation tools!

Demand without capacity is a fool's errand, and creation of capacity comes through prioritization of value over work, and a recognition that innovation must be nurtured and given space. As value is created, it must be celebrated, as failures are seen, they must be dissected to pull out the value of the lessons. Keep the focus on the VALUE PRODUCED, not the IDEAS GENERATED. Value measures will vary depending on the effort, but they must be a part of each effort, and a part of the mindset and story to ensure innovation is meaningful, even when risky and / or exploratory.

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# Creating a Culture of Innovation

The idea of creating a culture of innovation in the workplace is not new, but it seems to be a recurring theme in the enterprise across industries. The Harvard Business Review has a short article on this topic with the following three points, that I would like to expand a bit on.

## 1. Match Tasks to Skills:

- Give your employees projects that are demanding, while also making sure the tasks are a good match for their skills and resources.

## 2. Evaluate Capacity to take on Challenges

- Don't just give a new project to whoever has free time or could finish it most easily. Before you delegate, ask yourself, "Who would feel challenged by this project and has the capacity to rise to the challenge?"

## 3. Accept and Redefine Failure

- Aim for 70% success. If you expect everyone to nail a task with 100% success, they are unlikely to take risks, which is an innovation killer. Letting them know that 70% success is OK will ensure they don't play it too safe.

Source for points: <https://hbr.org/tip/2017/01/3-ways-to-create-a-culture-of-innovation>

## Match Tasks to Skills

These ideas are sound in the basics, but worth further discussion. On the idea of demanding projects, a good manager needs to understand the team make up. This first and basic step is far too often overlooked. I have time and again had employees or colleagues I have mentored tell me that I have given them more feedback and direction than they have ever received, or received in a long time. Why is that? My hypothesis is that it's because it is hard work - and takes time. Real time to talk, and accompanied by active listening. It takes trying to understand what drives people and what their goals are, and then shaping guidance to that set of needs and skills. This is the underlying foundation that makes this first principle work.

To give your employees projects that are demanding, while also making sure the tasks are a good match for their skills and resources is something that can only happen when you understand both the task at hand, as well as the skills and goals of your employees. The big value in this first point is more about the engagement with your own team, and the ownership that brings, than it is the task.

## Evaluate Capacity to take on Challenges

Building on the first approach of knowing your people, this on is guidance to:

*Don't just give a new project to whoever has free time or could finish it most easily. Before you delegate, ask yourself, "Who would feel challenged by this project and has the capacity to rise to the challenge?"*

Knowing your team and knowing their objectives helps create this opportunity for alignment. I have what I refer to as the "rubber band management approach". When I have high potential team members, I like to sit with them and have a talk that probes their capacity to stretch, to take on challenge. I then lay out the rubber band idea, and see if they bite. This approach says – I will set up a challenge for you that will stretch you, just like a rubber band. Before you break, I will partner with you to help you be successful, but you will be uncomfortable. We will repeat this challenge, again and again. What you will find is that each time, you stretch farther, and feel stronger and more able to drive on your own. This is what I see as the foundation behind this approach. Make the new projects and challenges a thoughtful part of a development plan, partnering with the team member to align with them on communication, and expectations. Help them know it is part of something larger and will help them grow while delivering meaningful value to their business.

## **Accept and Redefine Failure**

The article points to a 70% success rate – I would push that a bit to say success goals should be set at the beginning and measured through the life of the work. It is not that 70% is success. It is that a recognition that over the life of innovation, the goals may shift with new knowledge. It is that even with this, teams may still fall short.

Do not pretend it is anything other than falling short of the original goal. At the same time, celebrate the things that are real. This may mean celebrating courage to overcome fear, or inertia. It may mean celebrate getting to that 70% or whatever level was attained, but still producing real learnings that can be used to add value to the business. It must still be about value at the end, to keep driving a culture of improvement. By casting the outcome as a value measure, we can help teams keep the focus, and therefore performance where it belongs, on what will add meaningful business value as opposed to make people just feel good about being busy.

The overall thing I take away from this is that we as leaders owe our teams the time to understand them, and the time to shape goals to stretch and grow them. We have to do this while holding ourselves and our teams to a standard of "Value Production". We must reward value produced over work performed.

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## **Business Relationship Management - the role of IT as a strategic partner**

Business Relationship Management is a name for what is generally referred to as the "IT business partner". This is a role that sits between the more traditional IT organization and the broader general population in an organization, and helps translate opportunity and need to IT solutions in the most general sense.

I have held this role in various forms for a significant number of years, and over that time, heard many opinions on what it means, and how to represent value. I met [Vaughan Merlyn](#) while working at my current role, and took the Business Relationship Management training, from the [BRM Institute](#), from him. I enjoyed the course and was aligned with the approach enough to become a trainer for my company, though we have yet to fully realize that further expansion.

The salient point in this short post is the value of the role as a strategic partner, and how that is differentiating. I have had a number of conversations with peers in what we call our business partner roles, but that represent the BRM role. I hear a lot of complaints about how they don't want to be order takers, and how they struggle with relevance in a world where most business leaders are increasingly IT savvy. My argument back is that this is the time to truly embrace the definition of the BRM as described by the BRM institute, and seek to be defined as a strategic partner as opposed to "yet another IT gal / guy" who wants to add friction to my life.

I love the intro on this in the BRM institute:

Designed to **bring value to an organization through the convergence of different business functions**, the business relationship manager (BRM) role is a **senior-level, strategic business partner** who shares ownership for **both business strategy and business value** results.

[HTTPS://BRM.INSTITUTE/THE-ROLE-OF-THE-BUSINESS-RELATIONSHIP-MANAGER/](https://brm.institute/the-role-of-the-business-relationship-manager/)

My position is that we now have a great opportunity to capitalize on the growing appreciation for the contributions of technology to our business processes and by taking the time to truly understand our business domain as well as the technologies relevant to not only that field, but adjacent spaces, we can become that trusted advisor that helps shape business strategy to take advantage of both current technology and by understanding risk tolerances, also bring in emerging technology where relevant to the business outcomes!

We need to have the courage to see ourselves in the BRM role as those trusted partners, but that only comes through real investment in the business goals and strategies. The ability to "work on the surface" of the relationship is gone if a BRM leader wants to be relevant. What used to be differentiating is now table stakes, as

technology is often not a mystery and leaders are increasingly aware that they can gain advantages through well thought out approaches and tools. A real BRM, functioning as a strategic partner, will collaborate closely with the business teams, understand where they (Collectively) are trying to go, and in parallel, actively engage in industry research to better understand how to guide that business through the landscape of current and emerging technology options.

The strong and relevant BRM will be immersed in the business they support, and working regularly to be relevant and upgrade their technical skills, as well as building a broad and deep network of thought leaders to partner with.

This role is tougher than ever, but the opportunities are correspondingly growing at a feverish pace. I had conversations with one of our young innovators this past month, working with serverless solutions on AWS bringing data together into a Spotfire visualization, and came away so energized around opportunities across our portfolio I had trouble narrowing down on approaches to focus on - but that is the subject of another post though.

For now - as a BRM, please focus on continuous skill building and domain understanding to remain relevant, and help own a seat at the table, not sit at the edges hoping to be included.