

## THE CHALLENGE

The digital revolution has generated trillions of dollars in economic value, but often not for its original creators. Research In Motion, Motorola, AOL, Myspace – many companies have led the market in the first lap of the race only to miss the curve in the second.

Our client was no exception. After a remarkable decade, this global company had begun to falter. When a massive round of cost-cutting and layoffs failed to reignite growth, the company decided that the only way to regain its lead was through innovation. Senior leaders asked us to bring together executives from the US, the Middle East, Asia, and Northern Europe for a workshop that would strengthen the kinds of thinking and behaviors that encourage innovation – not an easy task, particularly as the recent layoffs and cutbacks had made even the company's leaders feel anxious and vulnerable.

## THE APPROACH

Successful innovation, researchers have found, depends on being good at two things: discovery and delivery – coming up with the right idea for the market, and then getting it to the customer. After interviewing several senior executives and observing the dynamics of the organization first-hand, we realized that the company was not very strong in discovery, which meant that its considerable delivery skills were being wasted.

To help the company build a stronger discovery capability, we designed a program based on recent research that found innovative organizations tend to be good at associative thinking and exceptionally strong in five key skills:

- Idea Networking
- Questioning
- Observing
- Experimenting
- Associating

We mapped these findings to a series of exercises that have been proven to encourage associative thinking and its four allied behaviors. Once we had the exercises in mind, we developed a customized curriculum for the company's senior leaders, which we delivered in a global program for the company's 420 top executives. Company leaders attended a four-day leadership program where our design rendered a core element.

## FROM DELIVERY TO DISCOVERY

The curriculum was structured in a way that all four key innovation skills received focus during the program.

### IDEA NETWORKING

We asked participants to name the top 10 “go-to” people they approached when they needed to spark a new idea, an exercise intended to show how important networks are for generating better ideas. Next, we divided the group into small circles that were thoroughly mixed by organizational function, gender, age, nationality, and professional background, and asked participants to idea network on the spot. Later, they followed up this initial introduction with more extended, informal conversations during the coffee and lunch breaks. Through this exercise, we aimed to show how “experts” could become idea-networkers by tapping people outside their usual circles and considering non-experts' ideas.

### QUESTIONING

The next session focused on cultivating creative ideas. For example, we took the participants to Betahaus, a Berlin co-working space that is an important part of the city's dynamic startup scene. One of Betahaus's founders explained their business strategy to the group and fielded challenging questions about the business. We divided the team into smaller peer learning groups and assigned a Betahaus entrepreneur to each group. While framed to the participants as a consulting exercise, we actually intended to open the participants up to generating questions that challenged the status quo in their business and/or their industry.

The young entrepreneurs and the seasoned executives both profited from the exchange. The Betahaus startup leaders noticed that the executives focused more on getting things done in established structures rather than on innovation. At the same time, they gained more respect for the executives' ability to use existing resources in global and complex environments.

For their part, the executives noticed that the start-up founders were very independent. They seemed not to recognize barriers, or to show much fear in their idea networking, unlike executives used to coping with a lot of organizational ambiguity. But the executives' biggest takeaway was perhaps a better sense of how to infuse a meeting with some out-of-the-box questioning and to create a safe environment in which to do it.

Participants split into five teams, each of which developed a presentation from the perspective of this assumed identity about how to make their real company more creative and dynamic. We encouraged them to use all four behaviors they had learned in the workshop as they prepared their presentation: sharing ideas through their networks, asking challenging questions, observing, and experimenting.

### **OBSERVING & EXPERIMENTING**

The following session began with a video about how the famous IDEO design team creates a new product, in this case, a shopping cart. This documentary on the development of rethinking this long-established idea helped teach participants about the working process of a highly innovative team.

After showing the video, we asked participants to write down a list of observation and experimentation techniques they had seen that they could apply to their own work right away. One key point for many participants was the counterintuitive emphasis on a rigid process, including extensive observation of how consumers pushed their carts in a grocery store.

Many also commented on the democratic way in which the team operated, with the leader acting as a facilitator rather than genius-in-chief. Instead of dictating a solution, or coming up with a few prototypes and then selecting the solution backed by the most charismatic team members, the leader waited until a vision emerged from the data they had collected.

### **THE IMPACT**

The executives left the last session of the program much better prepared to innovate than they had been going in, with a detailed action plan, and a wide array of tools and techniques for making their organization more innovative. They were now more self-aware of their own innovation skills and competencies. They had a deeper understanding of what innovation means for the company, had acquired a practical toolbox that encouraged all four key innovation behaviors, and realized that if they used these tools in a well-defined process, they could innovate in a fun and creative way that would also create value for their company. In just three days, the executives had already begun an exciting second act for their company.

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**MayCoach & Company** is a globally operating consulting firm in the field of leadership development, cultural renewal, global coaching solutions and assessments with over 150 professionals in 42 countries and offices in Berlin (Germany) and Singapore. For further information, please visit our website [www.maycoach.com](http://www.maycoach.com) or contact us at [info@maycoach.com](mailto:info@maycoach.com).

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### **ASSOCIATING**

In the final session, we told the participants to imagine themselves as outside consultants hired to advise their real-life company on how to develop a culture of innovation. For this exercise, participants took on the perspective of an executive at one of five of the world's most innovative companies, and were given a hypothetical letter from that company's CEO, outlining the assignment.