Rapid Innovation Teams

What started as an experiment has proven to be a very effective way to help move the needle on innovation progress in dozens of organizations; the small, powerful, multi-disciplinary teams that are formed on a temporary basis to advance and concretize an innovation task with a very clear focus. Applied properly, this tool might boost the desired outcome.

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Over the last few years, we have had very positive experiences with three different types of Rapid Innovation Team applications. Tangible outcomes stretch over the entire spectrum of the innovation process. As an additional benefit, this tool helps understand what it takes to make innovation successful in your organization and which barriers have to be removed. The three main areas for impactful application have proven to be:

Identification and validation of early product, service or business model concepts

Teams focus on quickly identifying and validating innovation opportunities in a customer-orientated way. It efficiently uncovers where to invest more time and resources and develop the idea further.

Acceleration of existing innovation opportunities and validation of economic and technical viability

In this area, teams are used to accelerate the specification of the technical and commercial viability of ideas that have already been identified by customers as desirable. Their task is to create a transition between front-end idea validation and commercialization as well as find new ways to launch products with innovative »go-to-market strategies.«

Strengthening organizational innovation fitness with achievement learning

Teams can also be applied to drive real innovation challenges while putting a focus on building or practicing new skills (e. g. around Design Thinking, agile ways of working or Lean Start-Up). It is called achievement learning because teams don't practice unimportant or ▶

even imaginary cases, but challenge what truly matters for the organization instead.

Tangible results

In all three applications, the pursuit of tangible outcomes and results is essential. They might be quite different, depending on the phase in which the opportunity is seized in the innovation process. On the front-end and in transitions, we mostly observe »insight goals« (e. g. ideas, assumptions, potential validated or prototypes tested), while in later stages, we see more traditional »business goals« (e. g. new customers won, distribution secured, sales achieved). In all stages, these outcomes can be combined with »enabling goals« (teams trained, skills and capabilities improved, processes piloted).

Creating conditions for success

The power Rapid Innovation Teams generate is not so much from a genius new methodology, but rather from creating the conditions where teams can actually function well for these types of challenges. Most organizations are set up to operate efficiently and avoid risk – running in »execution mode,« while innovation tasks require teams to navigate uncertainty and operate in a different »discovery mode.« Organizations usually tend to favor the more familiar execution mode. To push innovation, it is almost certain that organizations need to be able to run on both modes. To start with Rapid Innovation Teams, five conditions need to be put in place:

1 **Volunteer Teams**

Put together a multi-disciplinary team with people who either volunteered to support the project or who truly care about the challenge. Don't staff the team with whomever »just is available« at that time. All members need to care.

2 **Time Boxing**

The team only has a finite amount of time (usually three to four months or sometimes less) as well as a set focus. This enforces clear start and end dates during which they spend a minimum of 20 percent (20 to 50 percent are most common) of their time on this innovation challenge. This allows people to stay involved with the »day-to-day« business, but at the same time requires them to move into action quickly.

3 **War Room**

Teams need a dedicated project space where they can keep their materials, Kanban board and other related things. It serves multiple purposes, makes it easy to meet, enhances transparency and visibility and supports the interaction among the team members. As a side effect, this visibility often generates interest in and interaction with the project among others in the organization.

4 **Resources**

To allow teams to move fast without getting slowed down by normal processes, it is wise to ensure the availability of a small budget for the team upfront. It can be spent on travel, prototyping or even small team events without having to get approval. Access to special resources (lab's or 3D printers) or experts (internal and external) might also be secured upfront to boost the team's performance and allow them to go fast.

5 **Methods and Tools**

In addition, teams benefit from having expert support to implement methods and tools that might be new. Teams trying to learn to use agile work methods will benefit from a coach for the duration of the project.

CHECKLIST TO GET STARTED

- Identify an innovation opportunity to accelerate.
- Find a sponsor for the project and get the person on board.
- Develop a project charter describing the challenge, focus and scope.
- Recruit a team of volunteers.
- Prepare/secure the right conditions for the team.
- Invite to the kick-off.