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Innovation in Winning Organisations in Australia: Myths and Realities

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A 25-year study of 11 top-performing Australian organisations has revealed valuable innovation lessons for companies wanting to emulate them. These findings show that many conventional views on innovation are myths, and provide a practical guide to innovating successfully, overcoming the barriers many companies face. By using a broad definition of innovation and by getting the whole organisation geared for change, Australian companies can greatly improve their innovative capacity.

INTRODUCTION

The results of my 25-year study of 11 high-performing organisations in Australia from 1980 to 2006 (Hubbard et al., 2007) gives insights into innovation practices in these organisations. Since these organisations have been high performers over such a long period, their innovation practices bear consideration as role models for others.

The practices of these high-performing organisations do not agree with the conventional wisdom – the myths – that innovation is largely technically driven, product-oriented and limited to R&D departments. On the contrary, the findings – the realities – suggest that innovation is a state of mind, strongly linked to the value systems, supported through normal systems and processes and expected to occur throughout the organisation in all its activities. In particular, adaptability and collaboration were identified as key values and behaviours in innovation practices.

This paper begins by considering what innovation means in practice compared with the theoretical myths. The innovation practices of the 11 high-performing organisations are then outlined. Barriers that limit organisations from becoming more innovative are considered. The paper concludes with some practical recommendations for organisations seeking to overcome those barriers.

WHAT IS INNOVATION?

Green (2007) defined innovation as:

doing new things or doing things in a new way: drawing on knowledge and creativity to add value in products and processes. (pp 50–57)

This is a wider definition than simply ‘doing new things’ and specifically includes processes as part of the innovation spectrum. Innovation was seen as having three components:

- A technical component: this corresponds to the traditional definition of innovation as a significantly new product or service. This is the easily measurable and observable component of innovation.
- An organisational component: this reflects the process component, which is less easily observable and measurable to those outside the organisation but which, nonetheless, can have just as big an impact as technical components. It picks up the fact that more than two-thirds of innovation in Australia is non-R&D focused.
- An institutional component: this suggests that the external environment will strongly influence the innovation capability that is built within an organisation. It suggests that organisational attitudes to innovation – and therefore the amount of innovation that occurs – will be influenced by the nature and position of the indus-

try (e.g. entrepreneurial, start-up, mature, technological, commodity) and by the level of industry and government support for innovation in that industry.

In an early Australian study, Carnegie et al. (1993) also took a wide view of innovation. They defined it as:

something that is new or improved done by an enterprise to create significantly added value either directly for the enterprise or indirectly for its customers. (p 3)

Studying 120 businesses in Australia, they classified innovation into six categories:

- technological breakthroughs,
- providing new and improved products and services,
- creating better processes,
- combining process and product innovation,
- continuous product and service improvements, and
- across the board improvements.

The first two constitute the traditional 'technical' view of innovation, but the last two cover more incremental and more broadly based operational improvements, including processes, within the organisation.

The Business Council of Australia (2006) studied nineteen cases of innovation. While not defining innovation, they noted that there were widely different views held by organisations about what it constituted. They also noted that innovative activity extended across all parts of the organisation and was not limited to conventional R&D. Like Carnegie et al. and Green, this perspective also takes a wide view of innovation and draws attention to the different perspectives held within the business community about innovation.

The study of the 11 high-performing organisations in Australia (Hubbard et al, 2007, hereafter called 'the First XI' study) concluded that 'innovation in Australia is not generally big bang/big idea innovation' (p 100). It found that innovation by the First XI included:

- borrowing ideas from overseas,
- process innovations, and/or
- product and service innovations.

The organisations separated innovation from continuous improvement, though they saw them collectively as part of an element of their winning wheel framework – adapt rapidly – suggesting a close relationship between the two and the importance of both for high performance.

These definitions and conclusions have in common a broad view of innovation, a view that includes continuous/incremental improvement activities and activities that occur across the whole of the organisation. Not one of the organisations identified the 'breakthrough' innovations (conventionally thought to constitute innovation) as having a significant part in the innovations studied.

WHY THE GAP BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY?

Why is there such a gap between the myth of innovation as a breakthrough or big bang product or service and the reality of innovation evidenced in these different analyses in Australia?

One obvious reason is that, by limiting innovation to breakthrough products and services, very few organisations can imagine themselves as being innovative. Yet, evidence suggests that innovative organisations perform better than non-innovative ones (e.g. Frost and Sullivan, 2006; IBM, 2006). Therefore, by taking a wider view of innovation to include process innovation and incremental improvement, organisations can help everyone see themselves as potentially being involved in this important activity of innovation. The organisation can stimulate and utilise the creativity of all its people, rather than limiting this potential to those in a small, specialist department such as R&D.

The other reason is that much of the innovative activity actually observed is not product- or service-based. Since many of these other activities are clearly seen as important in improving organisational performance, formally including them in innovation seems appropriate.

INNOVATION IN WINNING ORGANISATIONS IN AUSTRALIA

Practices of the First XI organisations suggest that they take this wider approach and benefit from it. The First XI study found virtually no breakthrough innovations in products or services in any of the eleven organisations in the 25 years studied. Yet it found many examples of innovative behaviours that had major effects on the performance of those organisations. The study classified innovation into three categories: borrowing from overseas, process innovations and product and service innovations. We consider each below.

Borrowing from overseas

While taking an idea from overseas is not a breakthrough innovation, if the product, service or process introduced into Australia is a first, it will have the same effect in the local market as if it were a local innovation. Indeed, this borrowing process may well account for why Australian businesses are relatively low spenders on R&D. If you can

find an idea overseas that works and then introduce it to the local market, why spend the investment on R&D yourself?

For instance, Brambles' development of its Cleanaway rubbish solutions business began in a chance visit to the backblocks of a small US state during which the now-familiar wheely bins, which could be emptied automatically by a truck's mechanical arm, were discovered. Brambles had a garbage disposal system for industrial companies and saw the wheely bins as having potential in Australia. The development by Cleanaway of a wide variety of wheely bin solutions has resulted in a major international business.

Brambles' development of its CHEP pallet company came after the concept was introduced to Australia by the US Navy, which developed the system for unloading ships more rapidly during the Second World War. Brambles bought the system from the Australian government after the war, and developed the idea to the extent that it is now the world leader in pallet management systems; hardly a technologically complicated product, yet one on which a global business is based!

Another example is Qantas' development of low-cost airline Jetstar. This is very innovative for Qantas, a full-service airline. Indeed, no major full-service airline in the world has been able to develop a low-cost airline while maintaining its full-service operation. Yet, the idea of a low-cost airline was developed first by SouthWest Airlines in the US many years ago and then successfully developed by Ryanair in Europe, though many other low-cost airlines failed. Qantas learnt from those failures how to avoid the problems that full-service airlines had previously had with developing low-cost airlines. Yet it was far from a breakthrough innovation.

Another example is Woolworths' technological link to Walmart. Woolworths pays Walmart a fee to access its technology. Thus, many innovations at Woolworths come from initial research and development by Walmart. The close relationship between the two organisations has been further strengthened by recently retired Woolworths CEO Roger Corbett being appointed to the Walmart board of directors.

Process innovations

Innovations in processes, which similarly lead to significant increases in organisational performance such as higher growth, better efficiency or service, or better profitability, are just as important as product and service breakthroughs, but are much less focused on.

One of the best and most difficult process innovations by the First XI was Rio Tinto's fundamental reshaping of managerial roles and responsibilities, based on the decision-making principles of UK academic Elliot Jacques. Rio was concerned about its very poor industrial relations and the consequent effects on costs and profits. These were common throughout the mining industry at the time. Rio decided that it needed to take

managerial control of operations and develop better relations more directly with the employees whom they supervised, rather than letting unions and industrial relations courts impose general industry ways of operating.

Over a course of 15 years, location by location, by restructuring its management system, carefully allocating roles and responsibilities, training managers and employees and changing remuneration structures, Rio (in the face of great resistance from many quarters) changed the nature of employment practice and relationships in its organisation. It gained great productivity benefits and profit improvements, while also rewarding employee performance and obtaining much greater control and certainty over deliveries and customer satisfaction.

In 2007 Rio was working on two other major process innovations: the 'mine of 2020' (an environmentally sustainable mine), and block caving (a process of creating large open spaces in underground mining rather than the tunnels of today, thought to be important for the deep underground mines expected in the future).

Other examples of major process innovations in the First XI study include:

- Macquarie Bank's allocation of a specified proportion of pre-tax profit for bonuses for all its employees, thus aligning employee and organisation incentives and motivations.
- Harvey Norman's franchise system, whereby the franchisor provides a wide range of centralised services, including cash management and control to the franchisee.
- Lend Lease's development of the project management technique and of the strata title system, thus enabling property rights to be allocated to air space above the ground, enabling the development of apartment buildings in NSW.
- Westfield's processes for redeveloping shopping centres (as opposed to building new centres), which involves all building specialists upfront in the planning phase to maximise the cross-fertilisation of ideas and opportunities to see problems before the actual work begins.

These are at the heart of the success of the performance of each of these organisations. Yet each innovation is little understood because it is not a clear product or service that can be observed externally or which is sold directly to customers.

Product and service innovation

The third aspect of First XI innovation is the traditional perspective of product and service innovation. However, the examples of innovative practice from the First XI that fit into this category are incremental in nature rather than breakthroughs.

For instance, Macquarie Bank provides a host of examples. It developed the first Cash Management Trust, pioneered listed and unlisted infrastructure investment trusts and

expanded them into a wide range of infrastructure products such as airports, toll roads, tunnels, ferries and utilities.

The Salvation Army has consistently added new services, including a Problem Gambling Unit; water relief for drought-stricken farmers; a Youthworx community radio station as a training ground and employment avenue for unemployed young people; and Employment Plus, its business unit entry into the general unemployment market.

Product and service innovation at Woolworths has been about adding products and services that already exist elsewhere, such as petrol retailing, banking services, liquor chains, hotels and the expansion of Dick Smith's Electronics into superstore format.

What we do not see in First XI innovations are the breakthrough innovations, such as the iPod, iPhone, Xbox, mobile phone, laptop computer and drugs such as Viagra, which we associate with traditional concepts of 'innovation'. We do have such breakthrough innovations in Australia (e.g. Cochlear ear implants, MYOB business software, Biota's anti-influenza drug Relenza), but these are mostly in new entrepreneurial start-ups rather than large mature organisations.

Perhaps we do not see these in large successful organisations in Australia due to our small market size, the costs of commercialisation, the lack of commercialisation skills or our remoteness from large markets. Nevertheless, what is clear is that a very wide range of important, value-adding innovation occurs in high-performing Australian organisations. These innovations enable them to outperform competitors and go international, both of which are key expected outcomes for organisations now and particularly in the future.

THE ROLE OF ADAPTABILITY IN THE INNOVATION PROCESS

One of the nine elements of the winning wheel for Australian organisations in the First XI study was found to be the ability to adapt rapidly. Adapting rapidly was found to result from understanding the need for speed (without losing control), coupled with the need for strategic and operational flexibility, which was seen to require continuous improvement and innovation (see Figure 1).

Thus the First XI study found that in order to be adaptable, an organisation needed to both innovate and continuously improve. Further, the organisations adapted quickly, indicating the importance of speed, a factor we are painfully aware of now with the ubiquitous use of the Internet to communicate information all over the world instantaneously and conduct transactions at any time.

Keeping the strategy and operations somewhat flexible helps to allow rapid innovation. For instance, Macquarie Bank has expanded products and services internationally

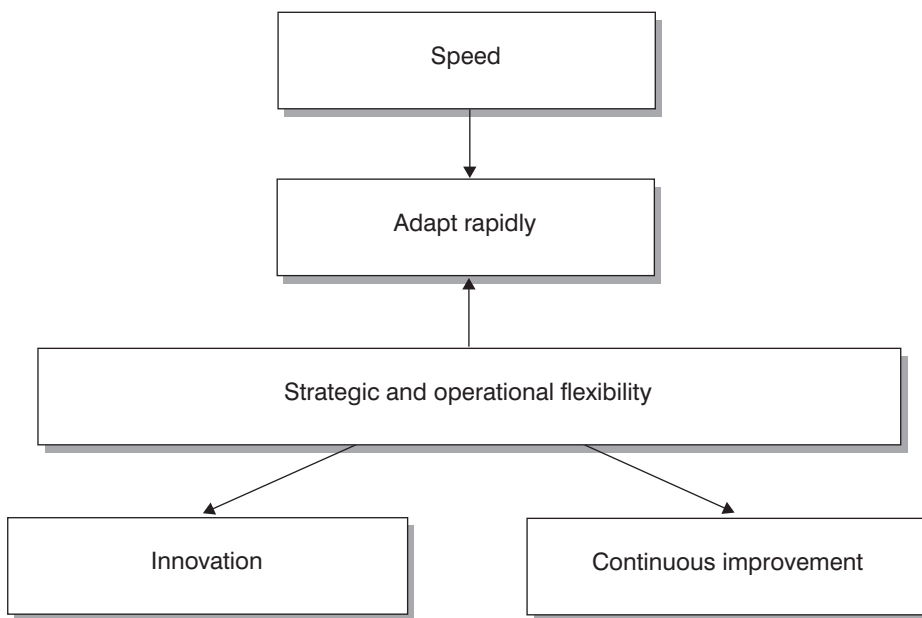


FIGURE 1: Factors behind adapting rapidly in winning organisations in Australia

by sending someone into a country to live from a hotel for some months while establishing whether or not there is a possibility of building a viable business there. If sufficient progress is made, the commitment is upgraded. If not, the person is brought back. This results in little investment up front and means ideas outside the existing strategy can be explored easily and quickly.

Continuous improvement is of course the ultimate in adapting. Whether or not continuous improvement constitutes innovation is unclear and seems to depend on the scale of the improvement. However, establishing continuous improvement as a goal encourages people in all parts of the organisation to find ways to improve their operations, improve their efficiency and find new sources of revenue.

The report *Backing Australia's Ability* (2004) noted that the roles of people and their interactions were critical for innovation. The more people interact, the more likely continuous improvement – and innovation – will occur. The First XI study found many ways in which continuous improvement was fostered through:

- creating a culture of change,
- having a customer focus,
- having growth as a driver,
- having a clear view of a desirable future,
- being dissatisfied with the current level of performance,

- having good people,
- having good systems,
- having a cost focus, and
- planning for continual upgrading.

In terms of speed, when Westfield considers purchasing other retail centres, it immediately considers what changes it can make to improve performance for customers, retailers and its shareholders. As soon as the transaction is finalised, it immediately begins the process of redevelopment. As Chairman and co-founder Frank Lowy said in a 2000 biography:

We eat, sleep and talk business. This is not an eight hour a day commitment. We are at it 24 hours, on the weekend too. The business hovers over us constantly.

Similarly, Qantas established and began operating Jetstar in less than 12 months, almost completely independently from Qantas' existing operations, with costs lower than its focused low-cost competitor, Virgin.

THE ROLE OF COLLABORATION

Another myth concerning innovation is that it is about a brilliant individual, working alone, who comes up with a good idea. US examples of Steve Jobs at Apple, Jeff Bezos at Amazon, and Larry Page and Sergei Brin at Google come quickly to mind. In practice, the First XI study found none of this in Australia. Instead, through another key element of the winning wheel, a practice identified as 'looking out, looking in', First XI organisations are externally focused in a number of ways (see Figure 2):

- They are focused on customers.
- They work with other organisations.
- They are focused on the future.
- They are thinking outside Australia.
- They have a sense of community responsibility.

In terms of innovation, working with other organisations is the most obvious example of the importance of collaboration, but all of these practices require some collaboration with other groups to achieve the sense of 'looking out'.

Working with other organisations included, particularly, working with partners, working with suppliers and working with governments and regulators (see Figure 3). Of these, working with partners is the most obvious link for innovation. For instance, while Macquarie Bank is widely admired for its new product and service developments, most of Macquarie's activities involve working in a joint venture with

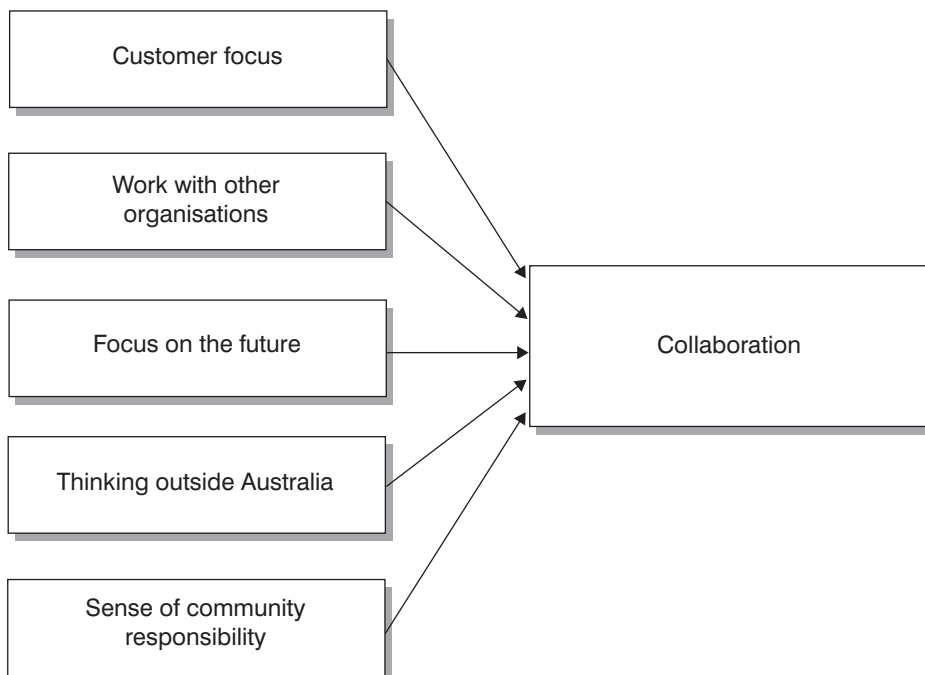


FIGURE 2: Factors behind collaboration in winning organisations in Australia

one or more partners. Macquarie Bank believes that its progress is limited by the shortage of good creative and innovative people. Its own employees are therefore encouraged (and rewarded) to identify high performers working in partner organisations (a good way to see what actual performance is like without incurring any cost) and then suggest they consider bringing their talents and creativity to Macquarie Bank.

Lend Lease provides other examples. It worked successfully with funds manager MLC and property trust investor and manager General Property Trust (GPT) for over 30 years to successfully develop proposals of value for each partner. Indeed, GPT was originally set up by Lend Lease to ensure that Lend Lease had a regular buyer of and manager of the major commercial properties that it developed, innovatively reducing the risk involved in the development process.

In 2007, Lend Lease was working in large-scale collaborations with BP (service station development), Brambles (airport privatisation), John Lewis (building and construction – UK), Mirvac (building and construction – Australia), Prudential (investment – Australia), Vanguard (investment – international) and Maple-Brown Abbott (investment – international) amongst others, aiming to develop more efficient and innovative processes in a wide variety of its activities.

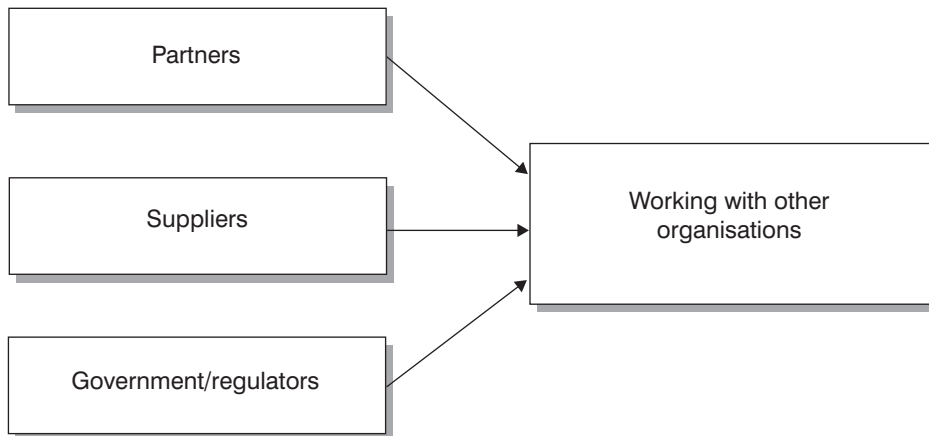


FIGURE 3: Working with other organisations

These First XI findings about the importance of working with others to innovate are supported by other research. For instance, Frost and Sullivan (2006) found that extensive collaborators outperformed in both growth and profitability. They also found that business performance is improved by collaboration, strategic orientation and market opportunities. They concluded that collaboration was much more significant in impacting performance than either strategic orientation or market opportunities. Similarly the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources (2006) found that collaborators had a much greater chance of achieving truly 'new' innovation.

BARRIERS TO INNOVATION

From the above descriptions of successful practice, many barriers to innovation will be clear. These include:

- *Organisations have a narrow view of 'innovation'.* A survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) suggested that only 35% of organisations undertook any form of innovation at all! A likely reason for this is that many organisations don't see themselves as being innovative or see that innovation applies to them or their industry. For instance, organisations in mature industries may well feel that the chances of innovation are small, and so do not attempt it.
- *Organisations misunderstand the importance of innovation.* While we have quoted findings above to support this, these are recent and are not yet widely disseminated. In the organisations to which I consult, although innovation seems to have arrived on their radar, few feel any real opportunity to innovate or reflect any understanding that innovation – and consequent organisational change – are important drivers for future growth and wellbeing.

- *Organisations are inwardly focused.* Many organisations are simply concerned with trying to manage their day-to-day operations to make themselves efficient. They do not see the opportunities to learn from what is going on internationally or in other industries.
- *Organisations are short-term focused.* An organisation focused on the short term will have trouble considering investments that will take a long time to bear fruit, particularly if those investments (e.g. those of a breakthrough nature) are seen as highly speculative and risky. Many listed organisations think the share market is short-term oriented, so managers act this way as a result. Organisations with a short-term focus will be unlikely to want to invest for the future, making investment for even continuous improvements likely to be reactive rather than proactive.
- *Organisations don't value continuous improvement or innovation.* Many organisations are now including either or both of these terms in their corporate values statements, to reflect the perceived importance that they have for future operations. However, many remain focused on short-term and financial performance, without seeing that lack of a change-oriented focus can be detrimental in the longer term.
- *Organisations are too slow to act.* Even if they start to develop innovative opportunities, the moment is lost through being too slow. Experiencing this loss once may well be sufficient to convince them they cannot follow identified opportunities in the future.
- *Organisations don't know how to innovate.* Many organisations realise innovation is a good thing, but do not know how to set up the climate internally to encourage innovation to flourish or what tools and techniques they should use to become innovative.

The issues identified above relate to the organisation's own areas of control – their attitudes, values, systems and processes throughout the organisation (see Figure 4). However, Green (2007) argued that organisational innovation is also impacted by its institutional context. The context that the organisation finds itself in can constrain its innovation attitudes and practices. For instance, institutional and contextual reasons for low levels of innovation can include:

- *Organisations are not exposed enough to competitive forces.* Organisations which have quasi-monopolies (e.g. government bodies, government business enterprises, geographical monopolies, utilities) may not see the need to add value when there is little or no competition. Therefore they underinvest in innovation. This will work unless the organisation suddenly finds itself facing competition, at which time its lack of competitive instinct will be painfully exposed.
- *The government is not supportive.* In industries where there is little government support, it may be argued that organisations will be less inclined to be innovative. However, this seems a weak argument. Waiting for government support is hardly conducive to the innovative climate that high-performing organisations seek to achieve. Further, government agendas and processes may not fit the needs of the

<p>Attitudes:</p> <hr/> <p>Narrow view of innovation Underestimates the importance of innovation Inwardly focused</p>
<p>Values:</p> <hr/> <p>Short-term focused Don't value innovation or continuous improvement</p>
<p>Systems and processes:</p> <hr/> <p>Too slow to act Don't know how to innovate</p>

FIGURE 4: Organisational barriers to innovation

organisation and can cause it to distort its activities by doing things simply to obtain government funding.

HOW TO IMPROVE INNOVATION OUTPUT

There is no magical silver bullet for innovation. Nevertheless, by undertaking a wide variety of small changes in attitudes, values and actions, any low-innovation organisation should be able to significantly change its innovation output. The following recommendations address the major barriers outlined above (see Figure 5).

In terms of attitudes, organisations can:

- *Take a wide view of what constitutes 'innovation'.* In particular, by including continuous and process improvements in the definition of innovation, all organisations ought – in their planning processes and the attitudes that underlie them – to be able to say they have innovative actions under way for the future. By taking this wide view, the organisation becomes more open to the world, a factor seen to be important in highly innovative organisations. (Chesborough, 2003, found innovative firms were more open than others.)
- *Understand the importance of innovation for the future of the organisation.* Standing still cedes new ground to competitors. Organisations need to be thinking about how to grow. Growth often requires change, particularly if the organisation seeks to outgrow its competitors. Innovation represents an important opportunity for change throughout the organisation and thus represents a significant mechanism for ensuring the future of the organisation. With this new understanding, an increased emphasis on innovative activities must follow.

<p>Attitudes:</p> <hr/> <p>Take a wide view of innovation Understand importance of innovation</p> <p>Values:</p> <hr/> <p>Value innovation Value continuous improvement Value speed Value change</p> <p>Actions:</p> <hr/> <p>Focus outward Think and act longer-term Develop/buy innovation training and development activities Make organisational innovation someone's specific responsibility Change the measurement and reward systems</p> <p>Organisational context:</p> <hr/> <p>Seek external support</p>

FIGURE 5: Overcoming barriers to innovation

- *Specifically valuing innovation and continuous improvement.* Including innovation and continuous improvement in the formal values of the organisation explicitly recognises that the organisation sees them as important, indeed fundamental, to the future of the organisation.

In terms of values, organisations should:

- *Value speed.* Many organisations are simply too slow in their analysis, decision-making and implementation to be effective innovators. Speed is important! Organisations should benchmark against competitors and find ways to increase response speed.
- *Value change.* Many people value the current status quo. They do not want change. Yet change is essential for innovation. Find ways to promote the value of change and celebrate the outcomes of successful change initiatives.

In terms of actions, organisations can:

- *Focus outwards.* By taking specific actions to become aware of industry and world trends (e.g. by attending conferences, visiting other organisations, gathering, reading

and analysing external information), many new ideas are bound to be raised. Choosing the best of them may well have a significant effect on the organisation's own innovative output. Australians are regarded as highly adept system integrators (Barlow, 2007, pp 58?65). Taking external ideas from a variety of sources and integrating them for the benefit of a particular organisation is a popular method of Australian innovation.

- *Think and act (a bit) longer-term.* Another myth is that organisations are assessed solely on their short-term results. Of course these matter, but the lack of a good long-term perspective is also taken into account by leading analysts. Ensuring that there is a pipeline of specific activities that will have medium- and longer-term impacts helps develop an innovative organisation.
- *Develop or buy-in a series of innovation training and development activities.* Many consulting organisations specialise in innovation frameworks. Try one or two. The initial investment, perhaps in a public or pilot program, will be low, but the signal within the organisation will be clear: innovation matters now.
- *Make innovation the responsibility, firstly, of an individual or group, gradually broadening it out over time to become part of everyone's job (at least in terms of continuous improvement).* While starting with a specialised department or group flies in the face of much of successful practice, someone or a small group needs to be responsible to get action going and then broaden the responsible group until innovation is embedded throughout the organisation.
- *Change the measurement and reward systems to include recognition for innovation and continuous improvement outcomes.* If values have been changed, aligning the measurement and reward systems to this will be important. Even if not, the focus on measurement ('what is measured is actioned') will ensure that some new action takes place. Trying to ensure the right things are measured and then rewarded becomes the next step.
- *Seek external support.* Work in alliances or joint ventures with organisations with similar or complementary interests. Seek funds from government. Many government programs and subsidies exist to encourage the development of innovation in organisations. But beware of undertaking certain activities just because government is rewarding them. The activities must align with business and corporate objectives if the innovative activity is to be appropriate for organisational success.

CONCLUSION

The reality of innovation is that attitudes, values, systems and processes that encourage and support innovation are important in high-performing organisations. Taking a broad view of what constitutes innovation, expecting everyone in the organisation to contribute and designing processes and systems to align behaviour to these attitudes and values will increase the innovative output of most organisations and align them more with the practices of high-performing organisations like the First XI.

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