

Why leaders need to stop delegating innovation

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Innovation is seen as something that CEOs and senior leaders need to delegate to their reports. Leaders tell me that they worry about the time it takes to speak to customers about product innovations, not to mention the risk that they will fail to think of a good idea. Many leaders say they are involved in innovation (and believe it), but research has shown the unfortunate reality: 85% of leaders do not feel personally responsible for coming up with new and breakthrough innovations for their company.

When I work with companies – even blue-chip ones – on building their innovation capability, I find senior leaders rarely attend our skills training.

However, when leaders do make the time to attend, the impact is astonishing. It sends an incredibly positive signal – their presence tells everyone that the organisation places great value on innovation.

Last year, researchers from Harvard University surveyed more than 3000 executives in the hope of understanding what differentiates leaders at “innovative companies” (15% of their sample) versus their non-innovative counterparts. One major finding from this research is that leaders working at innovative companies saw it as their direct responsibility to do creative work, whereas those at non-innovative companies believed it best to delegate such work.

In addition, it was found that CEOs of innovative companies spent 50% more time in what the researchers referred to as “discovery activities” – including asking lots of questions to a wide range of people, networking with highly diverse groups of people, observing customers and their behaviour, and experimenting with ideas and prototypes.

So, here are three things you can start to do right now to shift from the 85% to the 15% and take your company with you:

1. **Spend half an hour this week observing your customers interacting with your product or service.** Keep an eye out for things that appear to frustrate them. If you can generate solutions that alleviate customer frustrations, they will generally pay money for these solutions.
2. **Spend time with customers and employees and constantly ask the question “Why do you do that?”** Through constantly questioning things, you’ll be sure to discover better ways of doing things.
3. **Yes, do attend industry events, but force yourself not to simply hang out with like-minded colleagues.** Deliberately gravitate to those who you wouldn’t normally spend time with – people who seem significantly different. You’ll learn much more and get great innovation inputs through these diverse connections.