INNOVATING INSIDE LARGE ORGANIZATIONS

LESSONS FROM A TROUBLE-MAKER
WHO IS THIS GUY?

- My name is Devin
- Director of Data Science, Advance Auto Parts
- 20 years of experience in a variety of large organizations
  - Grew into technology, didn’t start there
- Reputation as an innovator
  - ....or pain in the hindquarters, depending on your perspective
WHAT THIS TALK IS . . . AND WHAT IT ISN’T

▸ Not research
  ▸ Purely anecdotal

▸ Not authoritative (nor the opinions of my current or former employers)
  ▸ Just my observations
    ▸ Plenty of room for disagreement and discussion
LET'S GET THIS STRAIGHT...

**BASELINE ASSUMPTIONS**

- Innovation is important
- Discussion is in the context of large organizations
  - Not startups or small firms
RECOMMENDED READING

- Rebels at Work
  - Read this before you take on The Man

- Innovator’s Dilemma
  - Build an intuition for the somewhat counterintuitive nature of innovation
  - Understand organizational perspective
BUILDING INTUITION

KEY TAKEAWAYS

UNDERSTANDING

EMPATHY

ACTION

IMPACT
“WHY IS INNOVATION SO HARD?”
INNOVATION IS HARD BECAUSE….

SUPPORT FOR THE STATUS QUO

- Product
  - Meets customer demands
- Processes
  - Multiple generations of operational lessons-learned
- People
  - Rewarded based current way of doing business
KEEP THIS IN MIND

LARGE ORGANIZATIONS GOT THAT WAY BY BEING SUCCESSFUL

- The way they currently do it, works (to a certain degree)

- New ideas can be subject to a lopsided risk vs. reward calculus
  - An innovation might pay off eventually, but the way things work now....works now
ANYTHING YOU WANT TO DO IS ALREADY SOMEONE ELSE'S JOB.

Devin’s Law of Bureaucratic Completeness
WHY EVEN BOTHER?
THE UPSIDES OF LARGE ORGANIZATIONS

▸ Numerous Opportunities for Innovation

▸ Significant Resources Available

▸ Potential for Significant Impact
EMPATHY
NO ONE THINKS THAT INNOVATION IS A BAD IDEA

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO STRONG FORCES

- Business of today
  - Familiar
- Need to innovate
  - Unfamiliar
A USEFUL LENS

UNCERTAINTY AROUND TECHNOLOGY
THE SPARK THAT SETS THE FLAME

FIND INSPIRATION

- Organizational vision/impact
- Problem solving
- Helping people
- Building stuff
MAKE FRIENDS
STORYTELLING & PROTOTYPING

Master your two most powerful tools
GIVE CONTEXT TO BOTH THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION

STORYTELLING

- Have a vision
- Learn how to talk about it in a compelling way
- Put it in the context of what other people care about!
REMOVE UNCERTAINTY BY MAKING IT REAL

PROTOTYPING

- Demonstrate (potential) value as quickly as possible
- Builds trust and allows for feedback
- Makes abstract ideas concrete
  - Acts like a map for the uncertain distance
IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITY AND FOCUS

- Find opportunities for impact
  - Gaps
  - Inefficiencies
IMPACTFUL INNOVATION - IDENTIFYING GAPS

AWARE

Skills Gap

Priorities Gap

DON'T KNOW HOW

Imagination Gap

Requirements Gap

UNAWARE

KNOW HOW
COMMON SOURCES OF INEFFICIENCY

- Law
- Policy
- Ideal Solution + Time
- Individual Drive + Skills Gap
ENGAGE THE BIG MACHINE
YOU PROBABLY DON’T WANT TO BE ON THE HOOK FOREVER

LEAN IN ON EXISTING RESOURCES

▸ Build Business Support

▸ IT Project Onboarding Pipelines

▸ Internal Innovation Platforms
A DELICATE BALANCE

AVOID GETTING BOGGED DOWN

- Permission vs. Forgiveness
- Under-the-radar vs. Buy-in
- Speed vs. Consensus

MANAGE YOUR “INNOVATOR’S DEBT”
Always ask to see the policy. Then actually read it.
FINAL THOUGHTS

CONCLUSION
GET COMFORTABLE
SHARING WINS

Accelerate yourself by crediting others
IN THE END, IT JUST DEPENDS

TALKING ABOUT HOW TO INNOVATE...

- ...is like talking about how to have a conversation
  - It is a balance of a few key factors
  - The right balance is dependent on a lot of context
  - It takes practice to get good at it
NEVER FORGET

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

- Find something to be passionate about
- Large Organizations NEED YOU
- You have options
QUESTIONS?