

## In Defense of Workshops

Remember that IBM commercial? The one with the room full of people lying on the floor with the lights out, claiming that they're "ideating" when they plainly appear to be sleeping? The one that implies that ideation workshops are fluffy, wish-and-a-prayer frivolities and that "real" innovation is something far more staid and serious?

To be fair, there are plenty of bad workshops out there. At some point I'm sure you've suffered through an afternoon crammed in a windowless conference room with a stammering colleague at a flip chart repeating, "C'mon guys, who's got an idea?" Or you have walked into a session where candy, crayons, and toys are in far greater supply than clear objectives, strategic insights, and a structured process. I once attended a session where the leader insisted that we dangle crystals over a list of concepts to identify the idea with the most "energy." Ouch. With all of the bad practices out there it's easy to see why the very word "workshop" causes many of us to duck and run.

When done well, workshops are highly effective vehicles for engaging individuals and teams around innovation challenges, promoting creative thinking by incorporating multiple perspectives, and speeding adoption and commercialization from teams who are bought into and aligned around a solution.

In the words of one financial services client, "It's great to see everyone engaged and the project gaining traction and momentum. The workshop helped us get so much further in such a short time." And from a CPG leader, "I've been in this industry for 20 years, and I can't remember a project that was more productive in terms of product development or building relationships." Furthermore, workshops serve as valuable learning opportunities that model

a new way of working and give innovation a human face and touch. Workshops make innovation tangible and provide a reflection point employees can go back to the next time they are called upon to think differently. To quote a client in the B2B space, "It struck me in our workshop yesterday that our team seems to be gaining competence and confidence with this innovation 'thing'!"

It's true that systemic, sustainable innovation is complex. Ideation workshops are not a replacement for a robust innovation process and growth strategy, and they will not overcome a risk-averse culture in a single day. But, despite the reputation that workshops have received as the redheaded stepchild of innovation, they are an effective path to new ideas. And at the end of the day, ideas are central to innovation. They are how companies create value and deliver growth. Workshops are a strategic and effective tool that belongs in the toolbox of every serious innovator.

So how are leading innovators using workshops to create value for their organizations? We've outlined a few examples below:

### **Frito Lay's Innovation Symposia – inspiring fresh thinking and renewed energy**

In the highly competitive food and beverage category, a key performance driver is "new and improved" products. From new flavors, packages, and forms to entirely new products, delivering innovation to the marketplace is a critical part of day-to-day business. When you are in constant state of innovation, the challenge becomes how to continually bring new insights and discoveries to the team so that today's "nacho blast" and next year's "hoppin' jalapeño" don't eventually become white noise to customers and consumers. To keep thinking fresh and engagement high, the Frito Lay team conducts yearly Innovation Symposiums. These turbo-charged workshops bring over 100 people and 10 brands together for several days of inspiration, outside perspectives, and ideation to jump start the innovation process with renewed energy, engagement, and ideas.

### GE's Experiential Workshops – empowering leaders to think, behave, and lead differently

This global giant and renowned innovation leader is working hard to develop businesses and business leaders that are agile, highly adaptable, and embrace change. They are defining a new breed of innovative organization that is capable of transforming its business continually in order to respond to ever-changing market dynamics. Workshops are a key transformation tool GE has leveraged to engage leaders in new strategies and teach skills in a collaborative, hands-on learning environment. Recognizing that its human nature to challenge and question information that is presented to you, GE uses workshop-style learning experiences that encourage leaders to absorb and adopt new information by rolling up their sleeves and creating ideas for their teams and customers. This approach helps leaders embrace new ideas by making them real and it has been used successfully to explore new growth markets, unveil new customer strategies, and develop high-potential leaders.

### Timberland's New Product Boot Camp – supporting open innovation and product development

Open innovation is a hot topic in R&D, and with good reason. No matter how big you are, it's a safe bet that the majority of category IP lies outside of the walls of your organization. (Kraft Foods, for example, estimates that 98% of food-related IP exists outside of their company.<sup>1</sup>) Tapping into external resources is an effective strategy for boosting new business growth and extending internal innovation horsepower. But like all varieties of innovation, open innovation requires a culture, tools, and organizational enablers to be successful. Timberland understood this when they tapped Prophet to lead a week-long product development workshop that brought together over 60 global supply chain partners to develop production-ready product blueprints for three key product areas. In the short term, the collaborative, side-by-side approach resulted in successful product solutions and radically accelerated time from concept to commercialization. But perhaps the greatest benefit was the long-term one: the strengthened partnerships that resulted from the collaborative workshop approach.

---

1 From "Applying principles of open innovation to drive growth" presentation by Steve Goers, VP Open Innovation & Investments, Kraft Foods, for Haas Business School speaker series, Feb. 2009.

### Trustmark's Renaissance – garnering the senior sponsorship and clarity needed for transformation

Trustmark Insurance is a conservative organization with a conservative culture and people who are paid to minimize risk. But when this nearly 100 year-old business found itself in a market environment where revenues were getting squeezed by industry consolidation and regulatory changes, senior leaders knew that it was time for reinvention and creative thinking. Recognizing that change needed to start with them, Trustmark's executive team and top 250 leaders embarked on a series of experience-based innovation workshops to help them look beyond actuarial tables and stimulate thinking about the company's future. The approach felt unconventional for the team, but the workshops created senior sponsorship and clarity around the need for organizational transformation, dubbed "The Trustmark Renaissance". Eighteen months later Trustmark had evolved into an organization where fresh thinking is encouraged and dedicated teams think about creativity rather than risk management. Shortly thereafter seven new products and services were introduced, contributing to 38% of new revenue<sup>2</sup>.

As these examples underscore, most revolutionary thoughts, ideas and solutions don't simply leap off of spreadsheets and PowerPoint decks. They come from people discovering insights for themselves and finding the personal passion and energy to push those ideas to fruition.

Workshops help set the right conditions for this type of discovery. They create the space for organizations to practice creative experimentation, collaborate and discover insights, and apply innovative thinking to their most pressing business challenges.

Catherine Strotmeyer is with Prophet a strategic brand and marketing consultancy that helps senior business leaders win by delivering inspired and actionable ideas. For more information on how workshops can benefit your company, please contact Catherine, [cstrotmeyer@prophet.com](mailto:cstrotmeyer@prophet.com)

---

2 Scanlon, Jessie. "Facing Disaster, Trustmark Launched a Renaissance." [BusinessWeek](#). November 4, 2009.