

# Pirates in the Navy

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Tags: [#innovation](#) [#organizational-change](#)

## Dialogue

Forbes: In defense of middle managers who stifle innovation.

Point: You're not Elon Musk

The value of discovering what other innovators are doing inside the organization. Ask these questions:

Why were the programs set up? What are they trying to achieve? Are these programs focused on creating new growth, transforming the company or both? How much impact are they actually having on either creating new growth or transforming the company?

Beware basking in the glow of the CEO.

Sure, the CEO loves you and sure, your program is looking really good right now, but you need to understand that while this is necessary support, it is not enough for you to succeed. It is probably less than 10 per cent of what you will need to succeed. When innovators feel that they have the support of the CEO, they think that they can do whatever they want and ignore other stakeholders within the business. This is a huge mistake.

The kinds of stakeholders to partner with are early adopters. These folks:

1. Understand that the world is changing and their company is not well suited to adapt to emerging trends.

2. Are acutely aware that their company has a deficit in the innovation capability needed to survive in the future.

3. Have been actively looking for solutions – which is partly why they have reached out to me.

4. Before they started talking to me, had already sponsored some internal innovation activities (e.g. hackathons or idea competitions).

5. Have the resources to invest and are prepared to make a time commitment to innovation.

The value of doing the work:

I have worked in teams that spend hours designing the bestlooking PowerPoint slides. Then they go on a sort of 'political campaign' of talks and meetings with stakeholders. During one such 'campaign' a sceptical stakeholder remarked that our team must not have much to do because we had apparently invested a lot of time in our beautiful slide-deck presentation. Ouch! What I have learned is that while it is important to have conversations, it's even better to do the work.

Point: Doing the work means you have relateable heros.

Key --> Celebrate like crazy. A few ideas:

Recording video testimonials Writing case studies Having early adopters write blog posts Featuring success stories in the innovation playbooks Having early adopters speak at company workshops

Don't get distracted after first wins:

Don't forget who you are. You are still a pirate in the navy. The reason you are telling the story of your early wins is to gain credibility in your company so you can go to the next stage. You are not doing it to become famous. Remember to always keep your eye on the prize.

What have you changed your mind on?

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## Quotes

It is a myth that innovation is sexy. In a lot of companies, it is career suicide. So, while startups are focused on resisting enemies and competitors that are outside their company, innovators within large companies have to contend with enemies and competitors inside their own companies as well.

Only a few leaders are happy with these crazy innovators. The majority of leaders view them as disruptive rebels, aka 'pirates in the navy'. These leaders actively create barriers to block innovation efforts, often driving intrapreneurs to quit their jobs in frustration. When innovation does succeed inside a large company, it is often in the form of one-off projects that have had to be guided through the landmines of corporate politics. This can be demoralising.

Innovation is sexy: Actually, innovation is brutally hard work that often leads to failure. The daily grind of innovation and its iterative nature requires people who are not easily discouraged. In most corporations, innovation is not sexy at all. It often spells the end of a promising career.

It's all about great ideas: Companies are constantly searching for more ideas using tools like idea jams, collaborative brainstorming and competitions. This is not enough – ideas are a dime a dozen and just a small part of the equation. Successful innovation is about turning great ideas into a business, with a sustainably profitable business model that can create value for customers.

And so, innovation theatre rules the day. This is a major pet peeve of mine. Some popular examples of innovation theatre include:

It's mostly innovation theatre: I cannot repeat this enough. Pool tables, bean bags, pianos, ping-pong tables, Post-it notes, canvases, copies of The Lean Startup, walls painted back-to-back with whiteboard IdeaPaint, posters with Steve Jobs quotes. Then there is the jargon: minimum viable products, pivots, experiments, iterations, customer development, design thinking ... blah blah blah. Most innovation labs are trying to channel their inner Silicon Valley.

Being a pirate in the navy means that you must never forget who you are. Don't get comfortable too soon. You are a pirate in the navy. The navy is still the navy. It is a traditional institution. When the lab was created, the navy was trying to figure out a way to tolerate your pirate behaviours without having to change itself. Until innovation is an institutionalised part of your company, tread lightly and pay close attention to stakeholders – particularly the key players and influencers in the company.

Innovators have to embrace the reality that nobody owes them their faith or attention. At the beginning of an innovation movement, we just don't have the credibility to insist that our approach is the correct one. What we are seeking is for the company to give us space and permission to try new things and demonstrate our competence as an innovator.

And it really doesn't matter if you have been a successful founder of a startup before. Corporate innovation is a totally different kettle of fish. There are many more political hurdles to overcome inside large companies before a new product can be taken to scale. This is why building good relationships matters.

Acting like you are Steve Jobs or Elon Musk before you have earned the right to behave like a big shot will only earn you enemies. What you don't want early on is people in the company that are emotionally invested in seeing you fail. You want to create the exact opposite of that.

I have learned that the Steve Jobs most innovators want to be is the glamorous version on stage, presenting the latest iPhone at an Apple event. Not many innovators want to learn how to be Steve Jobs doing the day-to-day innovation grind. There is a tendency to value ideas and creativity over dynamic systematic management processes.

Although I can clash with leaders, I often find myself at loggerheads with innovators. A lot of these folks seem to hate process. They mostly want to be left alone to get on with it. If they engage in any process at all, it's generally with lightweight, easy-to-use tools. They are mostly interested in the 'fun' parts of innovation: brainstorming, ideation and canvases with Post-It notes and sharpies.

It has always struck me as unreasonable that some intrapreneurs expect their progress not to be tracked and managed. They want resources from the company, but they don't want any accountability for their work. If innovation is to become a legitimate part of the business, we have to be more serious about our practices.

Leaders within various divisions and departments will often kick off their own programs without paying much attention to what else is happening in the company. This is your chance to make great connections.

Sometimes, innovation programs are fortunate enough to begin their life out of the shadows and get launched with great fanfare. These are the lucky few pirates who are embraced by the CEO speaking highly of their innovation team and how they are going to transform the fortunes of the company. You may be one of them and perhaps your own work was launched in this way.

So, you're flying high and basking in the love of your CEO. But stop right there and take a breath – you might be in desperate need of a reality check. Sure, the CEO loves you and sure, your program is looking really good right now, but you need to understand that while this is necessary support, it is not enough for you to succeed. It is probably less than 10 per cent of what you will need to succeed.

Now you've crashed back down to earth and your feet are firmly on the ground, you may be ready to hear that you've got a lot more work to do to convince other stakeholders of your value. When innovators feel that they have the support of the CEO, they think that they can do whatever they want and ignore other stakeholders within the business. This is a huge mistake.

Nobody wants to work with a know-it-all who thinks they are going to save the company. These people are actually very annoying. Some of the most challenging characters I have met are former startup founders who sold their last company and are now moonlighting as corporate innovators. These people may completely ignore key stakeholders or treat them like something stuck to their shoes.

In life, people tend to pay more attention to their detractors than they do to their supporters. This is important for survival. Identifying an enemy was once a life and death issue. While this might be a great instinct for surviving out in the real world, it is not healthy for an innovation transformation program. We do want to know where we might face challenges within the company, but we don't want to make our detractors the total focus of our work.

The majority of the work I have done has been commissioned by leaders who:

1. Understand that the world is changing and their company is not well suited to adapt to emerging trends.
2. Are acutely aware that their company has a deficit in the innovation capability needed to survive in the future.
3. Have been actively looking for solutions – which is partly why they have reached out to me.
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Working with early adopters is great for several reasons. First, it allows you to move fast early because you don't have to do a lot of selling. These people are likely to be super

keen to work with you. Second, it allows you to test your innovation tools and methods in a safe space, to make mistakes and learn with people who are not looking to tear you down. Finally, the biggest benefit of working with early adopters is that it can enable you to secure some early wins.

I have worked in teams that spend hours designing the best- looking PowerPoint slides. Then they go on a sort of 'political campaign' of talks and meetings with stakeholders. During one such 'campaign' a sceptical stakeholder remarked that our team must not have much to do because we had apparently invested a lot of time in our beautiful slide-deck presentation. Ouch! What I have learned is that while it is important to have conversations, it's even better to do the work.

Subjective norms refer to people's perceptions of the social pressure to perform or not perform a particular behaviour. Perceived behavioural control refers to people's perceptions of how easy it is to perform a particular behaviour. In large organisations, these two factors can have an impact on intrapreneurship. In the first instance, people may perceive that there is social pressure not to act entrepreneurial within their own organisation. And in the second, after seeing intrapreneurs struggle to get things done, they may also perceive that it is not easy to be innovative inside the company.

Getting an early win breaks these perceptions. As we celebrate our success, we provide people with a sense that intrapreneurship is acceptable behaviour within our company. We also show people that innovation can be done within our company. After all, it is their peers whose story we are celebrating.

It is all the more meaningful to the listeners because it has happened in the context in which they work.

So now we can begin our 'political campaign'. Before, we just had a slide-deck presentation of concepts and external examples. Now we have authentic stories to tell. Let's celebrate these stories like crazy. Make sure you involve your early adopters themselves to tell the stories. This will give us more credibility via peer influence and also give the early adopter leader a chance to shine. When they see other people getting recognition for innovation, others will be motivated to step up and get involved. Before you know it, you have the beginnings of a movement.

Don't forget who you are. You are still a pirate in the navy. The reason you are telling the story of your early wins is to gain credibility in your company so you can go to the next stage. You are not doing it to become famous. Remember to always keep your eye on the prize.

In fact, all the adulation you are currently getting has just put a bigger bullseye on your back for the naysayers. If you think your work on innovation was viewed as an annoyance

before, now that you are succeeding you are viewed as a genuine threat. So humility and focus are needed more than ever. You may have won over a few more people to your cause, but there is still a lot to do.

In fact, your early win can be rightly viewed as another innovation in a series of one-off projects. This is not very different to what was happening before you started. Remember, our goal is to make innovation a repeatable process within the company and to make entrepreneurship a legitimate part of our company's structures and processes. We need to make sure other people can innovate in the future.

So don't get caught up by a preliminary success and forget there is still work to do. It's time to leverage the positive buzz around your early wins to build a repeatable process inside your company.

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