CIRAS Offers System for Innovation

When Kyle Kraudy, director of engineering at Conductix-Wampfler, called CIRAS account manager Bob Coacher in the spring of 2011, he was looking for someone who could guide the company through some brainstorming to come up with new ideas for product development.

Coacher put Kraudy in touch with Paul Gormley, CIRAS project manager, who specializes in innovation systems development. "Our goal is to help companies learn to continuously innovate," Gormley explains. "We provide companies with a comprehensive system for discovering, defining, and developing profitable ideas for growth that will work within their present business practices."

That's precisely what happened at Conductix-Wampfler, manufacturer of products designed to transmit power or data from a stationary point to a moving machine.

The company had been developing an internal system for capturing new product ideas. "We were trying to refine it when we started working with Paul," Kraudy explains. "Now, using information from his sessions, we've developed what we call NPIES (New Product Idea and Evaluation System)."

Gormley began working with the Conductix-Wampfler team of 16 which included representatives from manufacturing, engineering, marketing, and sales, as well as the CEO. The first session called for team members to explore areas they were unfamiliar with. This activity forces people to learn new things, providing them with a fresh perspective to familiar issues, according to Gormley.

Then, in an all-day creative session, participants were asked to create five to eight innovative process, product, service, or business model ideas. The goal was for individuals to develop their own ideas but leverage small teams to hone them.

Next came a systematic process for selecting two ideas to pursue. The key requirement is transparency in order to gain the trust and involvement of the entire team.

When two ideas were selected, a small group was assigned to each idea to examine it in depth. Each week the project manager reports back to the entire team. Once all questions have been addressed, the team makes a recommendation on whether to carry the idea forward as is, modify it, or kill it.

"The end game isn't the ideas you develop this time," Gormley says. "The ideas don't always work. Sometimes they get killed, and we celebrate that because we have figured out it won't work and can move on to the next idea."

As a result of the sessions, the company is moving forward with two projects and has implemented a system for developing new ideas.

"In the process now, someone generates an idea, and they have a series of questions they must answer," Kraudy explains. A manager then reviews it, followed by group meetings to discuss and refine the idea. "At this point it can be compared with other ideas in the system," he continues. "Instead of going by the gut feel that one person may have, this is a concrete system that allows better scrutiny of ideas by a lot of people."

Conductix-Wampfler international headquarters was so impressed with NPIES that the Omaha team is revamping the system so it can be extended to all of its corporations globally.

Meanwhile Gormley is very excited about the process. "This is about growing a company's top line, strengthening their future, and providing great places for people to work."

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