

## Six Skill Sets for Innovation

**Daniel Wolf, 09-13-2009**

In today's business world, the capacity to innovate is more important than ever, and employee diversity can enhance or constrain that capacity.

An organization's strategic agenda provides a framework to build the capacity to innovate and create new strategic and economic value. Through the strategic agenda, people at every level become engaged in a road map for growth, performance and change.

At Ingersoll Rand, Tiger Teams are used to challenge people with key strategic objectives to forge ways to work together in tough collaborative settings focused on processes as well as outcomes. HR Director Troy Hayes said, "The success of the program and its innovative outcomes is derived through a thoughtful approach that forces collaboration among diverse people who do not naturally work together in the day-to-day business." This requires advanced skill sets.

Individual and group skill sets are tempered by different experiences, knowledge, judgment, values and perspectives. These culture-born differences can enhance or constrain an organization's collective capacity to innovate.

Further, a portfolio of individual and group skill sets is necessary to deal with the specific, collaborative work of innovation. How people bring their collective thoughts, approaches to problem solving, skill sets and unmet needs together is part of the process.

Individuals bring unique capabilities and attitudes to the work of innovation, and these reflect intellectual and attitudinal skill sets in six areas that make a difference:

1. **Subject capacity:** Subject-matter expertise, process knowledge and category exposure that lead to know-how and knack.
2. **Creative capacity:** The talent and demeanor to forge new ideas, different pathways and open frontiers.
3. **Resource capacity:** The engagement and leverage of capital, systems, people, time and processes that converts to impact.
4. **Analytic capacity:** Critical evaluative and comparative thought that contributes to problem-solving and decision-making.
5. **Solution capacity:** Forming options that address problems or market spaces not filled with attractive solutions.

6. **Relation capacity:** Communication and influence at the personal and enterprise levels, geared to build ideas, people and value.

Diverse individuals and groups must gain the leadership and management sense to connect these skill sets in their work and practice. Those who build awareness, understanding, appreciation and engagement in these different skill sets are more likely to create and sustain the capacity to innovate. Those who struggle to bring these skill sets together at the project level, and in everyday practice, will earn some success, but not enough to sustain the capacity to innovate.

Building the talent to balance these six skill sets requires a blended learning approach, one that mixes principles with experience managing and leading project work with a diverse group of interests. If there are best practices in this area of strategic thought, two key themes resonate. First, there is a requisite level of self- and social awareness for those working to build the skill sets needed for innovation. Second, there is a related leadership and management premise at stake that values active engagement of diverse skill sets on key projects.

Len Kistner, a product development expert, explained the importance of connecting people with diverse knowledge and skill sets in major programs this way: “In a changing world with complex conditions, we need to bring people together to drive innovation in more effective ways. This requires matching skill sets to the strategic agenda.”

The capacity to innovate has near-term and long-term consequences for an organization. Recognizing and using these diverse skill sets is critical today and tomorrow.

*Daniel Wolf is a founding partner of Dewar Sloan, a management consulting and advisory practice focused on strategic leadership, and the author of two books, Prepared and Resolved: The Strategic Agenda for Growth, Performance and Change and Boards and Strategy: Leadership Themes for Governance. He can be reached at [editor@diversity-executive.com](mailto:editor@diversity-executive.com).*