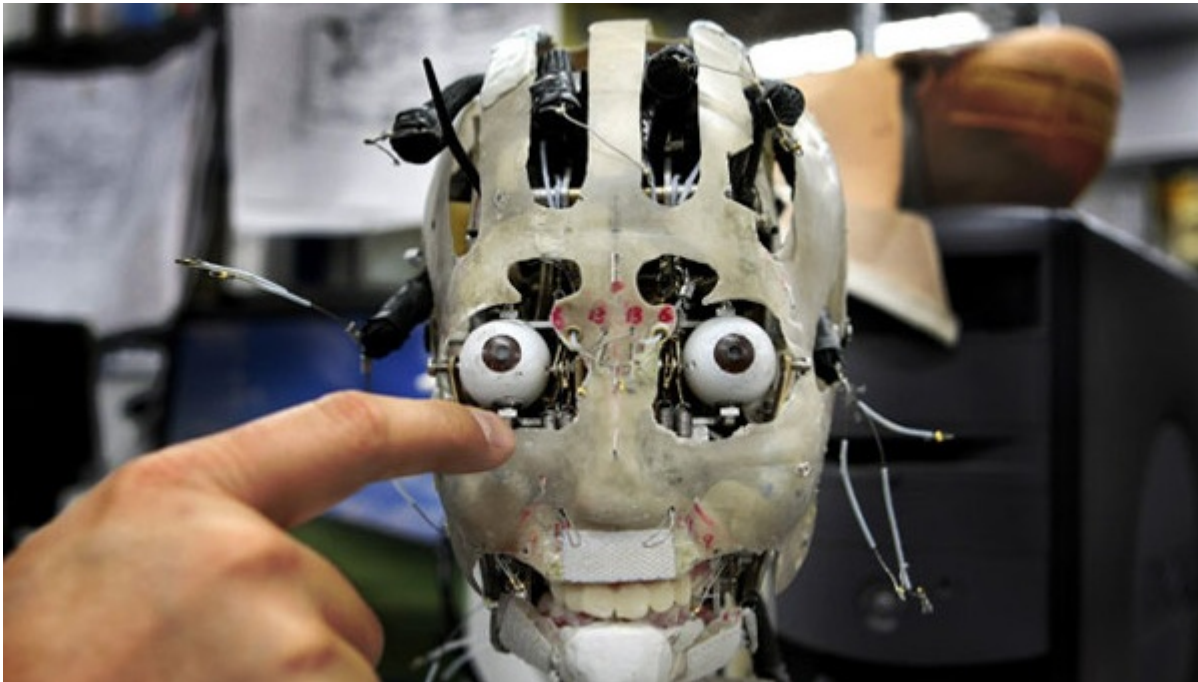


Innovation coaching has become more popular

By Thomas Menkhoff

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A recurring challenge in business is to create and implement innovations – usually a new or significantly improved product, service or process -which meet customer needs or exceed expectations, hopefully at an affordable price. Examples include smart banks like the German Web 2.0 bank Fidor, with its focus on social media, e-commerce, games and mobile internet); Dropbox, which allows users to store files in the cloud; or the latest jetpack – like a motorised backpack - developed by New Zealand-based Martin Aircraft Co.

For many companies, it is essential to overcome barriers to creativity and innovation coaching can be a suitable solution to meet this challenge. Effective coaches can help managers understand the entire innovation value chain from strategic idea to the development and launch of a better product, service, or process which then delivers sustainable value.

Such coaches must possess the right personality traits and attributes such as emotional intelligence, people skills, and the ability to get others thinking, but should also have a track record of guiding real innovations. They need to listen closely, motivate positively, demand the very best, challenge assumptions, and give honest, non-offensive feedback. This approach will benefit the individuals being coached and the organisation as a whole.

Effective coaches are able to create a climate of trust which helps to develop a relationship-based, collaborative, high performance culture. Research suggests that those who have received innovation coaching view it as an effective developmental tool with good payoffs.

If considering good role models in this area, a few immediately come to mind. There is Silicon Valley's Bill Campbell who worked with Steve Jobs for several years. Campbell was Columbia University's head football coach in the 1970s before joining the business world. There is also design thinker David Kelley who founded product development firm IDEO (Palo Alto) which built the first mouse for Apple. Sports and educational coaches can also provide ideas about innovations, notably Bob Bowman who trained Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps to plan goals and visualise success and, thereby, achieve results few thought possible.

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Quality innovation coaching can help everyone from start-up entrepreneurs to senior managers in established industries to excel in their jobs. The focus can be the creation of a collaborative culture of creativity or to convince the boss to finance the setting-up of a design thinking lab. With the help of candid conversations about the barriers to innovation, such as defensive reasoning along the lines of “we have never done this before”, it becomes possible to generate new ideas and get around all sorts of roadblocks to creativity.

Such coaching, though, requires time, openness and commitment. It also takes a willingness to reflect about insights, lessons learned and execution tactics. However, it is increasingly important for managers and entrepreneurial leaders to have the relevant competencies, and companies which ignore this trend could face serious issues regarding productivity and competitiveness.

Whether in the east or west, innovation coaching is not about analysing past mistakes. It is about creating and nurturing robust cultures of innovation and a better sustainable future.