

Internal Entrepreneurs – On the Edge

By Susan Foley

Internal entrepreneurs spend a lot of time venturing into uncharted territory. They enjoy charting a new course, exploring the unknown and experimenting with new ways of working. They are the scouts that forge ahead to see what's around the corner or over the next mountain. They prefer to take the path less traveled, one that may lead them in a new direction. Internal entrepreneurs embrace the unknown because they see it as a field of possibilities. They push themselves and their teammates outside of their comfort zones by experimenting with new approaches that challenge existing practices.

Living on the edge requires a keen understanding of the perils of choosing the wrong path or making a tactical error that can bring the project to an abrupt halt. Internal entrepreneurs have to take calculated risks. They may be required to make a strategic change in direction and justify their decision with limited data. They may have to retrace their steps to find a better alternative to suit the new direction. They may be forced to choose between two unattractive alternatives. Internal entrepreneurs must be willing to accept the consequences of their decision and acknowledge their mistakes if they do not choose wisely.

Internal entrepreneurs need to be highly adaptable to changing situations and thrive in an environment of change. The fundamental problem for internal entrepreneurs is that they do not know what they are expected to change into. In many cases they are creating the change as they move through the process of seeing what works, discarding what doesn't. As one internal entrepreneur remarked, "*We are laying the tracks as we are driving the train.*" There are no roadmaps or guidebooks for them to follow. They are creating a new path, a new way forward. Internal entrepreneurs are driving change through their actions.

Internal entrepreneurs must create new ways of thinking that are not burdened by past experience. They realize that old patterns of thinking and experience can get in their way. Internal entrepreneurs have a mental picture of what is possible. They may not understand the details or exactly how things will get done, but they have a vision firmly planted in their mind. Getting others to see what they see can be challenging especially when the rest of the organization has not been through the same process of discovery. It is difficult to effectively translate a new vision into a picture that can be easily communicated and adopted. New patterns of thinking are required to change old mental models.

Internal entrepreneurs often ask themselves if they have gone too far, alienated the rest of the organization, broken one too many rules or stood up to authority for the last time. Even though they know what it takes to work on the edge, not everyone is comfortable being on the edge.

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