

# SUSTAINING PARTICIPATION IN INNOVATION INITIATIVES IN ORGANISATIONS

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## About the Author



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We are at the half-way mark of what the Government of India called the “decade of innovation” (2010-2020) in 2009 [1]. During this half a decade, we saw the buzz around innovation traverse the hype-cycle. We are currently witnessing a start-up boom and perhaps a bubble as well. In the last five years, many organisations in India across various sectors launched or revived their innovation programs. Some, like Cognizant and Titan, have also won prizes for their innovation programs in the international competitions [2,3]. Today, having an innovation program is no longer a differentiator in the Indian industry. What matters more is the effectiveness of such a program. To judge innovation capacity of an organisation objectively, one model the author has used is called a 5-level innovation maturity model [4]. Using this model, an organisation can self-assess its situation on a scale of 1 (Jugaad-level) to 5 (Excellence-level).

Currently, majority of the organisations in India fall between level-1 (Jugaad) to level-3 (Engaged) [5]. One parameter where most struggle is in sustaining the participation in these initiatives [6]. When the initiative is launched, there is an enthusiastic participation. However, the initiative loses steam in the second or the third year. What happens? Why doesn't the participation sustain? And, how do we sustain the participation in innovation initiatives? These questions are explored in this paper.

The paper is organized as follows. First we look at what we mean by participation and how it is measured. Next, we present two dimensions of innovation maturity-creative confidence and incubation effectiveness. Using this model, we present the hindrances in sustaining participation in innovation initiatives. Finally, various options that can help sustain the participation are presented.

### Measuring participation

Innovation activities in an organisation can be classified into following categories:

1. **Idea generation/development:** Challenge definition, Idea generation, prototyping, presenting the idea, business model exploration
2. **Reviews:** Reviewing of ideas, commenting on ideas (especially in a social networking site).
3. **Championing:** Sponsoring of campaigns, Investing
4. **Training:** Participating in a training / workshop related to innovation, delivery of training
5. **Innovation management:** Create and maintain a business relevant roadmap of the innovation program, balance innovation portfolio, publish a dashboard, identify champions, run campaigns, develop partnership network etc.

An employee is said to be participating in an innovation initiative if (s)he participates in any of the activities mentioned above. This implies that someone who is reviewing an idea or acting as a sounding board for an idea is also playing an important role in the initiative. Similarly, a senior manager who sponsors an idea campaign based on a key organisational challenge is also playing an important role. Participation is typically measured as a percentage of employees who have participated in any of the activities mentioned above. However, sometimes participation in only the idea generation/development (activity no. 1) is measured. In fact, one of the oldest methods of measuring participation is to check the number of employees (as a percentage) who contribute at least one idea in the year [7]. For the purpose of this paper, we would like to use participation in all the activities. Now we know what we

mean by participation and how to measure it. Next let's look at two key dimensions along which innovation activities vary and its implication for participation.

### Two dimensions of innovation maturity

Innovation maturity can be analysed through two dimensions: (1) creative confidence and (2) incubation effectiveness. Creative confidence is the ability of an individual to identify and define a problem, iteratively refine the solution as well as the problem and present a solution to various stakeholders to get their buy-in [8]. Incubation effectiveness is the capacity of an organisation to select a few big challenge areas, motivate a few teams to work on those challenges and selectively invest in the promising ideas following a review process [9]. Following simplified 2x2 depicts 4 situations.

**2 dimensions of Innovation maturity**

Creative Confidence	H	Kaizen	Excellence
	L	Daily-rut	Lab
		L	H

Incubation Effectiveness

Jugaad quadrant represents the situation where innovation is ad-hoc and not measured. An innovation initiative that focuses only on continuous improvement will take the organisation to the Kaizen quadrant. In this quadrant, many employees routinely come up with ideas that solve problems related to their work and implement them. Majority of these ideas would be small in terms of their impact as well as cost of implementation. Moreover, most of them don't involve much risk.

Hence, their rate of implementation can be high. Kaizen participation can be as high as hundred percent[10].

On the other hand, an initiative that focuses only on a few big bets will take the organisation towards the Lab quadrant. Imagine a dedicated research or innovation lab with a few chosen “innovators” working on a few big ideas and the rest of the organisation is busy with business-as-usual. A lab ensures focus on a chosen business or research problem. However, it will always have limited participation by design.

Ultimately, Excellence is the desired quadrant where both creative confidence and incubation effectiveness are high. An organisation is said to be in this quadrant when effectiveness of both continuous improvement and incubation processes is high.

Now that we know the goals of an innovation initiative in terms of measurement and dimension, let's look at why participation doesn't sustain in these initiatives.

### Key hindrances in sustaining participation

**Big-bets-only approach:** Imagine an organisation with a large employee base with low creative confidence. If the management invites only big bet ideas, then chances are high only a few people will participate. Most others will feel, “It's not for me.” And, even if participation is generated through a challenge campaign, only a few ideas will be selected for further development. Which organisation can afford to take too many big bets? Hence, chances are high the initial enthusiasm will die down soon as only a few people will get to participate in the innovation activity. When an idea is rejected in the first round, there is no learning. Real learning happens when you get to experiment. Thus, big-bets-only approach is unlikely to result in

sustained participation in an organisation with low creative confidence. Note that there are organisations (e.g. Google) where hiring process ensures high creative confidence. In such places, it makes sense to focus primarily on big bets.

**Slow response:** Imagine you submit an idea in an idea-box or on the idea portal and you get a response after six months that your idea is rejected. Would you ever submit an idea again in this setting? Slow response time is a big de-motivator [11]. It creates an impression that nobody cares about the ideas people are submitting. In reality, it may not be about the intent of the reviewers. For example, it could be the case that remembering yet another login and password of the idea portal may be the primary deterrent. No matter what the cause is slow response time is a sure path to dropping of participation.

**Lack of help:** Many ideas are in crude form in the beginning. Idea authors need help in clarifying the assumptions behind the idea. Sometimes just listening to the idea author may itself be of great value to him. If such help is not easily available then the chances are high the idea doesn't take a shape that can appeal selectors. Similarly, once a potentially big idea reaches a review stage, help may be needed to create a business case. The help needed could be in defining the product / market, identifying differentiating features, showing return on investment or sometimes it could be about creating a presentation. In short, idea authors need help during the lifecycle of the idea and if that help is not available, it may be a demotivating factor.

**Absence of dashboard:** Dashboards are common in organisations. There are different dashboards for capturing the progress of delivery schedule, product sale, defect resolution etc. Dashboards communicate in a concise manner how a team is progressing on a certain dimension.

In the absence of such dashboards, it is very difficult for employees to know how things are going. Innovation dashboards are no exception. A simple dashboard depicting no of ideas, no of contributors, no of prototypes, business impact gives a good ideas to everybody on how an organisation is doing on innovation [12]. If such a dashboard is absent, it may create an impression that organisation is not serious about innovation. After all, what matters is measured.

Now we look at ways that would overcome these barriers to participation. First, we will look at ways that will be useful to an initiative no matter which dimension is being focused on. Then we will look at ways that will help sustain participation in the continuous improvement process (focus on small ideas). Finally we will look at ways that will help sustain participation in the incubation process (focusing on big bets).

### **Core elements of sustaining participation**

#### **Program management:**

Innovation initiative can be viewed as a sequence of interventions each trying to improve a set of parameters such as idea pipeline, participation, idea velocity, business impact etc. Each intervention has a goal and typically incorporates learnings from the past interventions. An intervention could be a challenge campaign, a training program, an innovation-day event, a concept plan review, a partnership building program etc. Planning and tracking of such interventions is a function by itself and needs dedicated attention. Hence, program management role is crucial for innovation initiatives. Depending on the size of the organisation this could be a full-time or part-time role. However, in most places it is difficult to do as a 10 percent activity. An

organisation serious about its innovation program gives attention to this role [18]. One of the key deliverables from program management function is the release of innovation dashboard at regular interval (say monthly or quarterly). It creates transparency and focuses energy on a few selected parameters. One such story of how innovation program gets managed is presented by the then Head of Innovation at Ericsson, Gabriel Broner [22].

One of the key activities innovation program management function needs to do and usually doesn't get attention is identifying and scaling the bright spots.

#### **Spot and scale bright spots:**

When participation in an innovation activity is low or declines, one natural question that comes to mind is – Why is participation low? Is there anything we can do better? Answers to these questions may give us useful pointers. However, what get overlooked in this process are the bright spots where things are working perhaps in some corner. An approach that focuses on what is working already as opposed to what is not working is called “Following the bright spots” [19]. Bright spots point to (a) an already existing motivation and (b) an existing situation that enables the right behaviour.

Here is an example of how bright spots approach was applied for “low participation” problem. In a challenge campaign 43 ideas were contributed by 25 employees. That meant participation of less than five percent. However, it still meant a potential of studying the 25 bright spots. That is what a team did. They had one-on-one interviews with each of the idea authors and tried to understand where their motivation came from. Two things stood out (a) immediate manager's encouragement – either in team meetings or during informal talk (b) reminders from the organizers. With these data points,

organizers ran an awareness campaign for managers and also became more diligent about their reminders. This helped increase the participation further.

Program management and focus on bright spots are the core elements of an innovation initiative. What if your primary interest is continuous improvement focus? What else can be done? Let's see it in the next section.

### **Sustaining participation in the continuous improvement process**

Following two things would help sustain participation in continuous improvement process and help build creative confidence [13].

**Defining an acceptable idea:** What is an acceptable idea? This may depend upon the context. For a semi-literate worker of a garment factory, an idea of putting wheels under a waste basket may be an acceptable idea. While for a software engineer in an IT company, putting a microcontroller under a coffee mug which switches the monitor off during the coffee break to save energy may be an acceptable idea. No matter what the definition is, it helps to clearly articulate what an acceptable idea is through various examples. When such clarity doesn't exist, it will impact participation.

Acceptability of an idea in a continuous improvement program would depend upon the identity of the participants (sometimes also called an occupational subculture [23]). The identity of an engineer would be different than that of the garment worker. A definition of an acceptable idea need to satisfy following two criteria:

- Bar is low enough so that majority of the employees may feel confident to try
- Bar is high enough so that majority of the employees would feel proud of the idea

Note that the definition may evolve over the years. As an organisation builds creative confidence, it can raise the bar on what may constitute as an acceptable idea. No matter what the starting point, it helps to define an acceptable idea.

**Distributed review mechanism:** One reason why response time for idea slows down is because the approval mechanism gets stuck at a few managers. For these managers, reviewing these ideas is usually not a priority. One way to resolve this problem is by pushing the approval as low as possible [14]. For example, first line managers or Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in the teams can approve ideas which are straight forward and low-cost. In a technology obsessed world, sometimes face-to-face interaction is overlooked. There are ways devised such that the tool can give automatic response or the feedback comes only through email. In some cases, where SME and idea author are not co-located this is understandable. However, a face-to-face feedback is far more impactful in encouraging, probing the idea deeper, clarifying and identifying bottlenecks. Companies like Cognizant have created roles like Catalyst to help idea authors take the idea further [21].

Next, we look at how participation can be sustained in the other dimension of innovation maturity – incubation process.

### **Sustaining participation in the incubation process**

Following two things would help sustain participation in the incubation process.

**Championing a challenge:** Senior managers who identify and take a position on a tough business challenge play an important role in the incubation process. Popular examples are Ratan Tata for Nano, Mike Markkula for Apple [15] and George Fernandez for Konkan Railway [16]. A champion sometimes



sponsors the effort but more often he articulates the challenge and the vision. He supports the team through the ups and downs. People participate and stay with innovation projects when they see long term commitment from such champions.

**Rigor & rhythm of review:** It is not sufficient to sponsor a big bet project. Progress of such a project needs to be reviewed at regular intervals. There needs to be a rigor to the review. For example, if the project is to demonstrate a Proof-of-Concept (PoC) within certain time, then it should be questioned if the PoC doesn't happen. Similarly, there should be an expectation around timely escalation in case the project is stuck somewhere. An innovation project may not generate revenue and / or profit in a matter of months. However, at every stage there should be milestones towards which the

team is working. The review committee should look at various perspectives – technology, market, regulatory, strategic fit, financial etc. A good review should result in unearthing key issues / risks and define steps in validating the leap-of-faith assumptions. A criterion like Real-Win-Worth it serves as a useful starting point for reviewing big bet proposals [17].

### Conclusion

In this paper we looked at the question of how organisations can improve and sustain the participation of employees in innovation initiatives. Through the lens of creative confidence and incubation effectiveness, we looked at the hindrances of sustaining participation. Finally, we looked at ways of improving participation in continuous improvement process and incubation process.

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