

Strategic Agility – Collaboration in the Internal and External Environment

In my opinion, collaboration and communication are two key factors required in ensuring that an organisation is agile enough to take full advantage of opportunities in the external environment. Yet, they are the two factors that I often find lacking when I visit organisations. How often do we hear people talk about capturing ‘lessons learned’ only to find that, what they really mean, is that there have been ‘lessons identified’; with the same errors being made over and over again and/or innovation, that has led to success, not being fully utilised in the future. As highlighted in my previous articles failure to collaborate can lead to loss of market-share, due to the failure to meet customer expectation, and high staff turnover, due to not meeting employee expectation, in that professional development is stifled; people then take ‘tacit’ knowledge with them – thus weakening the organisation as a whole. Let’s look at internal collaboration.

For internal collaboration to be effective, everyone needs to understand the Value Chain (working back from the Customer) and the cross-organisational interactions that should support it; providing an insight of the role that each department, or cell, will undertake. This should be supported by a holistic communications system that allows for the sharing of information, data and software tools across the organisation so as to increase information transparency. However, to take advantage of opportunities in the external environment, collaboration has to go further than just communicating across an organisation.

There is also a need to collaborate with external stakeholders – some examples:

Customers. There are many ways in which companies can collaborate with customers to assess the quality of a product or service and gain an insight of customer expectations. Amazon utilise a feedback format whereby customers rate the quality of the product and/or service that they have received. Many companies utilising this format will also add a comment box so that people can provide an insight into how the product and/or service can be improved. Facebook have a unique way of testing their products – their employees, as customers, test these products using their own IT devices and provide feedback. However, you need to ensure that a ‘it is nothing to do with me’ syndrome is avoided. Customers being bounced from one department to another due to a lack of internal collaboration, when trying to sort out a problem, will not stay with you for long.

Suppliers. Collaboration with suppliers is paramount to ensuring that the quality of product or service is maintained throughout the Value Chain. This is especially relevant where organisations are utilising ‘just-in-time’ purchasing or where an external platform or organisation is being used to deliver a product or service.

Subcontractors. Through collaboration, Amazon offers a platform for other merchants, such as booksellers, to sell their products – but they still need to ensure that the product and/or service meets their own quality standards. Another would be collaboration between Google Android and mobile telephone companies.

Trade Links. This could be trade associations or, as with our own consultancy,

organisations that you network with in order to swap information. For my own consultancy this can often generate further research and development with a view to improving the services that we provide.

Effective collaboration, that aids agility, requires that people foster an openness that creates trust and a practice of reciprocal contribution.

Please share your thoughts.