

Double Binds as Killers of Progress

Everybody's screaming for innovation. And rightly so, of course, because without it it's going down the drain, sooner or later. You don't want to belong to the dinosaurs after all (unless, of course, you feel good as such).

The subject of innovation is as old as entrepreneurship itself. Only there is something panting about it recently, because everything is going faster and faster, and you can feel the breath of bloodthirsty, disruptive start-ups in your neck, so you have to do something to become faster and more innovative yourself.

Although, by the way, at the moment it seems as if these startups are simply swallowed up by the dinosaurs. But let's not ruin the drama we've just built.

It leads to all the big companies making immense efforts to promote innovation, and so the slogans are: "Be brave!", "Think out of line!", "Disrupt yourself!", "Allow yourself to fail!"

But then of course the difficulties begin. Because the reward systems all too often operate the same way as they did before: success is rewarded, and success is measured by money. There are variations:

- a) Small, fine innovation hubs are founded as a part-time job for intrinsically motivated employees, but this activity is not even considered in the reward system. Then you really need a huge amount of intrinsic motivation to really put energy into it. All the more so when your line manager stands on the doormat at regular intervals and asks with barely concealed pressure whether one is willing to step out of the sandbox and devote oneself to one's business goals.
- b) Innovation efforts are rewarded, but only if the ideas lead to money, and as much as possible. It is then not the innovation that is rewarded, but its impact. Sounds reasonable at first, or at least what has so far been defined as reasonable: "The results count." But that leads to a Double Bind: "Be courageous, but do not fail." The relaxedness necessary for creative processes will not exactly come up with a call like that.

Double binds en masse. Also popular in this category: the proclamation of a cross-departmental and cross-functional cooperation culture, and then it turns out that everyone will continue to be rewarded for achieving the goals in their core area. You shouldn't be surprised...

But what then? Performance should be rewarded, that's the core of every incentive system, isn't it?

The real joke is that the conclusion that these must be the best people when their idea brought the most money is simply nonsense. Because monetary success is determined by many other factors, not least by luck, the influence of which is massively underestimated (look at the research of Kahneman, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, after all).

Perhaps we should rethink the definition of "good performance". And then perhaps reward not the financial impact, but virtues, cleverness and cooperation, in the confidence that the fruits will ripen then. Of course it's more difficult to measure, but you don't want to behave like the drunken man in the old joke, who searches for his key under a lantern at night, two blocks away from the place where he lost it, and when asked why he does that, then responds: "Well, here it's just light at least".

Why don't you just keep an eye on whether your company is really rewarding the behavior you want. With a little luck, you'll find a good lever.