MAXIMIZING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRONT-END-OF-INNOVATION ASSIGNMENTS

BUILDING & MAINTAINING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAM ALIGNMENT

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For more information on an effective framework to manage the FEI, review our whitepaper: **Go innovate! Now What?**

Cross-functional teams are essential to product and service innovation; however, any time there are people involved, the "Fuzzy Front End" will remain fuzzy. One of our clients calls this place, "a simmering pot of ideas, opportunities, opinions, politics, and fear."

While a significant amount of literature exists on what it takes to build a culture of innovation, little is written about what needs to be done specifically during front-end-of-innovation (FEI) assignments to establish and maintain cross-functional team alignment. Team alignment, effective communication of the insights and opportunities, and team confidence are essential to FEI success. Over the past decade, we have identified five best practices to maximize the effectiveness of FEI assignments through better alignment of cross-functional teams.

1. SCOPE THE PROJECT THOROUGHLY

There are four key areas to establish team alignment: business objectives, learning objectives, success criteria, and evaluation criteria. When scoping FEI assignments, the conversation often starts with learning objectives; however, teams should first align on the business objectives. For example:

- What is the overall strategic mandate, and how does this project fit?
- Into which innovation platform does this potential project fall?
- What is the genesis of the platform, and why is it a priority?

Next, the team must align on the success parameters. A large-scale FEI project can be expensive. It is important that the team understands how success will be measured and how the team will articulate a return on investment to senior management, especially when much of the output may be conceptual.

There are many ways to approach this. Sometimes teams are already held accountable to a revenue target for a new platform or future product launches. In other cases, simply delivering a specific number of concepts is enough. It is indeed difficult to quantify the success of an FEI assignment, but the establishment of key performance indicators (KPIs) is an important step. Once the business objectives and success criteria are established, the learning objectives should align to those goals.

Finally, the team must agree on how to evaluate ideas. FEI assignments can generate hundreds of ideas, so it is essential that the project team is aligned on how they will prioritize them at the time the project is scoped. If they are not, there is a high probability the team will not reach consensus on which concepts to advance in the pipeline.

Some teams can establish project parameters, success criteria, and evaluation criteria with little effort. It is common, however, that some teams need a formal process to cross this important hurdle. That's where a Scoping Workshop may be warranted.

Such a workshop typically includes a combination of one-on-one interviews with each team member followed by a facilitated team discussion to drive consensus on the project parameters. It ensures everyone is on the same page and builds excitement and momentum toward next steps. The workshop is also a great way to assess the team's readiness for the substantial FEI effort. If there is still significant misalignment or trepidation after the workshop, "put on the brakes" before major dollars are spent on focus groups, ethnography, surveys, and more.

The result of extensive project scoping is your project charter, which will guide the rest of your FEI assignment. Take the time to do it right and make sure everyone is on the same page.

2. NEVER REMOVE THE GUIDEPOSTS

An aggressively timed FEI project usually takes 8-10 weeks from start to finish, and it is like stepping on a moving train. Once the project is scoped, there is generally a whirlwind of research activity to frame the insights and opportunities followed by ideation sessions and concept-writing.

Because of all the moving pieces, the risk is high that team members will lose sight of the original project charter. This is why it's important to review the charter often. Make it the opening dialogue for every meeting. As new players enter the project, familiarize them with the agreed-upon parameters.

After the research has been conducted, another essential component to team alignment is the establishment of insights, needs, and pain points. Organize this information into easy-to-understand opportunity areas (OAs) like the one below. A collection of OAs will serve as your innovation roadmap and are ideal inputs to an ideation session.

TARGET	Commercial airframe painters
INSIGHT	The time that it takes to install window coverings takes me away from more critical processes in airplane painting
NEED	I want a more efficient and standardized way to cover passenger windows before airframe priming and painting
VALUE PROP Functional Benefits Emotional Benefits	• Faster process • Reduced errors and waste • Focus time on more critical processes • Less time stress
CURRENT SOLUTIONS	• Aluminum foil and aluminum tape • Kraft paper and masking tape • No commercially available solutions identified
STARTER IDEAS	

During ideation and concept building, if the team has not internalized the OAs (and do not "buy into them"), team cohesion will suffer. Any other outside parties participating in ideation or co-creation need to know the project charter and OAs as far in advance as possible.

3. MAKE IT REAL

The research portion of an FEI assignment involves actively listening to the needs, pain points, beliefs, and motivations of real people and ensuring the client team has internalized them. Immersing the team in the research as much as possible is the best way to achieve this. There is no better way to align a team than to throw them into the middle of a feedback session.

Immersion also applies to ethnography. Perhaps the most successful ethnography we've witnessed was when members of a client team worked side-by-side with hotel housekeeping staff. The amount of learning on unmet needs was unprecedented. During ideation and concept refinement, it was much easier to understand how ideas could make the housekeeping job more efficient and less strenuous because several members of the project team cleaned rooms for a few days.

Granted, it is not feasible to immerse every member of the project team in the manners described above. The following are some great tactics that ensure the full project team build empathy prior to ideation and concept building:

- **Designate a Needs Champion.** If it is not feasible to immerse the full team in the research, immerse the right people. Select one or two team members to be the "Needs Champion." Their job is to attend all research and then make sure the voice and ideas of the research participants stay front and center at every team meeting.
- **Conduct an Empathy Workshop**. It is imperative that the entire team is fully aligned on the insights and needs prior to ideation or concept refinement. To ensure this, assemble the project team to review the research results and then participate in creating the OAs or even personas. Because the team designed them, there is generally significant buy-in.
- **Create a Seat at the Table**. An extension of the some of the ideas above is to create life-size cutouts of personas and give them an actual seat "at the table." When discussing issues, it's common for team members to ask, "what would Sally (fictitious persona) want?" It may seem a little corny to some, but it works.
- **Co-Create.** During ideation and concept refinement, there are unique ways to blend the customer/consumer/user and the client team. Having that customer "in the room" can be a tremendous equalizer, and keeps the team focused on who (and what) really matters. When doing qualitative research, we always keep our eyes open for the "super participant"—someone that can clearly articulate needs, has good ideas, and seems thoroughly engaged in the process. When feasible, that participant is invited to participate in ideation and concept building. In effect, he or she ***is*** the "customer representative" for the innovation team.

4. PACE YOURSELF, SMARTLY

During an innovation assignment, some calculated pacing between specific phases can help maintain momentum and team cohesion.

Scoping requires careful planning and should be done slowly and deliberately to ensure everyone is on the same page. This step may take several meetings, a formal workshop, or other tactics but is the most important step in maintaining team cohesion throughout an innovation assignment.

The phase dedicated to determining customer needs, typically takes the most time and usually involves qualitative research to hear and understand those needs. Quantitative research is used to validate their prevalence and priority among the target customer. Once the studies are completed, assemble the entire team so they hear the results at the same time and from the same person.

Once customer needs have been internalized, it is critical to move quickly to ideation, concept building, and concept evaluation. If too much time passes, there is a decay effect and teams start second guessing themselves. Take advantage of the momentum coming out of qualitative and quantitative research. You'll be amazed at the results.

5. PLAY TO EACH PERSON'S STRENGTHS

When working with large client teams, you often wind up with diverse personalities and skill sets. I don't mean to be too stereotypical but think about the people in marketing vs. research and development. A lot of naturally creative people are drawn to the marketing field. Those with strong problem-solving skills often find their way to research and development. Each, however, makes a unique contribution to the innovation function.

An innovation assignment requires a diverse talent pool, and its overall success depends on the right combination of people and process. Team alignment can be compromised when the wrong people are called upon at the wrong step in the process and when the process does not account for the differences in people. To help guide these decisions, we rely on a framework of Innovation Archetypes called TeamBuilder, which is very accurate in predicting the strengths various individuals will display at different steps in the innovation process.

Earlier I mentioned an important role of the "Needs Champion." Did you know there is an archetype that is hard-wired to sense and internalize customer needs? It's true. We typically refer to them as Storytellers.

Another archetype, the Implementer, is process-driven and is the perfect choice to be the person keeping the internal team corralled and on task.

During ideation, ensure that each small group has at least one Creative and one Problem Solver. These two archetypes excel at generating original ideas, and their presence will help those in the group who find brainstorming more difficult.

During concept building and refinement, Problem Solvers and Implementers are at their best. This process requires small group work with an emphasis on distilling ideas into something more concrete.

At the beginning of an innovation assignment, test your project team for their innovation archetype. This gives the project owner insight on how best to leverage each team member throughout the process. Always make sure that each person knows his or her archetype and that the full team understands how the archetypes work best together. When team assignments are based on leveraging unique gifts and abilities vs. things like tenure and position, it goes a long way in building team cohesion.

Archetyping also encourages self-reflection. When you make someone aware of their natural impulses, they are more likely to keep those in check. The Organizer, for example, can find ideation frustrating because at times it seems like a lot of spaghetti being thrown at the wall. Well, it is supposed to feel that way. If the Organizer knows why they feel the way they do, they are more likely to “let it go” than disrupt the flow.

The best workshops and team meetings are designed to accommodate and maximize every archetype in the room. Activities can be designed that activate the left and right sides of the brain and tap into the potential of each person. If everyone feels connected to the process and that it accommodates their individual needs, this too, improves results through better team cohesion.

Building and maintaining team cohesion is an important aspect of an innovation assignment. Keeping a team focused on the insights and needs is, without question, the best glue.

Establish clear guideposts and make sure everyone knows the boundaries from the beginning. Keep these guideposts visible throughout the assignment. And, always look for opportunities to maximize the engagement of the project team. Everyone has unique gifts and abilities, and careful consideration is required to ensure that these gifts are being maximized to their fullest extent.

ABOUT KIP CREEL & STANDPOINT

KIP CREEL is the president and founder of StandPoint. Kip has chief responsibility for business development and methodology and is the firm's overall research supervisor. Prior to founding StandPoint in 2002, Kip spent 8 years at another Atlanta-based market research firm in positions of increasing responsibility, including Director of Research and Vice President.

Previously, Kip worked for a division of Merck Pharmaceuticals, and InfoQuest, a clinical research organization, in analytical roles.

Kip is a thought leader in insight-driven innovation and is on the faculty for Stage-Gate® International and teaches marketing management in an executive education program affiliated with Texas A&M University.

Kip holds a BS in Microbiology and Statistics and an MBA in Hospital Administration from The University of Florida.