NEW INSIGHTS FOR SUSTAINING AN INNOVATION ENGINEERING CULTURE

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ABOUT ME

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Maggie Pfeifer is Vice President of Education at Innovation
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ending improvement of the corporate and higher education
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In addition to being the Ranch's lead educator, Maggie has helped
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CONTENTS

If you're reading this, you've been through Innovation Engineering training. Now what? Hopefully, you and others at your organization want to use what you learned and expand the philosophy to others. Here are a few ideas and advice for how to reduce the fear and friction on your journey.

As you know from personal experience, Innovation Engineering training, for the most part, is pretty fun. You get to mindmap new hat ideas, craft a pitch for a gerbil vest, and fly paper airplanes in consecutive PDSA cycles. Along with the inevitable laughter, there are also many aha moments during these seemingly silly exercises.

However, when we circle up at the end of a (live) training session and I ask for departing thoughts - many of you have expressed fear. Fear that you have to return home to a system that will restrict you, or to a team or boss who hasn't been exposed, i.e. "drank the Kool Aid." And you wonder how you can effectively implement the techniques you learned during the training. These are very rational fears and I always wish I had some way to instantly change the environment that you're walking back into.

What you don't realize at that moment is that the magic of your training is yet to come - in the cycles of feedback and on-the-job application project. You will implement each tool or technique back on the job as a part of your certification, which is where the fear, hopefully, starts to fade and the confidence grows.

You have to live through the awkward leap of faith required to run your first create session with colleagues or pitch your boss on a new (meaningfully unique) idea. You have to carve out a little time to

address a Death Threat through PDSA cycles and experience the thrill, first hand, of uncovering unexpected information or resources to overcome it. Will it be easy? Probably not for most. Will the application project be a first step in testing a new approach to working differently? Hopefully yes.

Over time, instead of seeing restrictive environments and non-converts, you start to see the possibilities for change and expansion.

In an ideal world, by the time you got to training your organization would have already implemented policies and practices in line with an IE approach and mindset. But in most cases, they've sent you before they can fully support you. You're likely a pioneer who has volunteered or been selected to try something new – to inform and influence the team or the projects you manage. And so you begin, as all of us do, with the hand you've been dealt.

Over the past few years, we've trained and certified hundreds of IE Blue Belts who are tasked with affecting change within their sphere of influence. And according to their project work and reflections – they ARE affecting change! According to IE Fundamentals course evaluations, 60% of them are accomplishing work they could not or would not have otherwise done.

However, there are definitely lessons learned for ways you can set yourself and future IE trainees up for success. Here are four ways to reduce the fear and the inevitable friction that comes with changing how you (and those around you) work.

01   Make Real Changes to Your Schedules and Scorecards

As you know, there is one application project built into your IE training, but what happens after that? Without a looming deadline or an IE coach on the ready to provide feedback – how can you sustain any regular innovation or proactive problem solving activity?

My suggestion is to build it into your schedules and scorecards. Start with simple ways to adapt your schedule to support the creation and execution of new ideas. Here's an example. Our small team here at the Eureka! Ranch has made a daily ritual of asking for and giving feedback to one another, and I recommend trying something similar.

Everyone on our team is working on their own projects or programs. But once a day one person gets our full team's attention for about 15 minutes at 4pm to ask a question, show a prototype, or get help in any way that makes sense to advance their work. (We do a rotation so each person gets a day.) Yesterday we reviewed a mock web page, the day before we mind dumped on possible topics for a webinar, and the day before that we did a stimulus mining challenge and posted findings. 15 minutes. That's it. You'd be surprised at what you can get out of folks in that kind of blitz, and the ripple effect it creates on your culture.

So that is one small example of working the mindset and toolsets into your weekly schedule. But this can be expanded to think through annual cycles and how you report or evaluate the quantity of ideas implemented, cycles completed, impact generated, etc. on a regular basis with your direct boss or supervisor. How might you take or give credit to this type of work?

Structure drives behavior, and making these types of underlying system changes is going to be most effective in making the philosophies stick.

02 Provide a Sense of Belonging

Another way to reduce the fear of implementing new tactics is to connect new trainees to a network of other like-minded individuals. The sense that you are part of something bigger, of belonging to a group gives strength to the new mindset. Being "in it together" provides reinforcement, purpose, and meaning to work.

When I see a functional team come through the IE Fundamentals Course together, I know they have higher odds of making it all stick. They walk away with a common language and a shared experience where trust and relationships are strengthened.

If you didn't have the opportunity to be trained with your entire working team, you can still create a sense of belonging to those who have been trained in other departments or business units. Create a shared group chat or channel to stay in touch with others who have been to training. Use it as a place to connect, share success and failures, and ask one another for help.
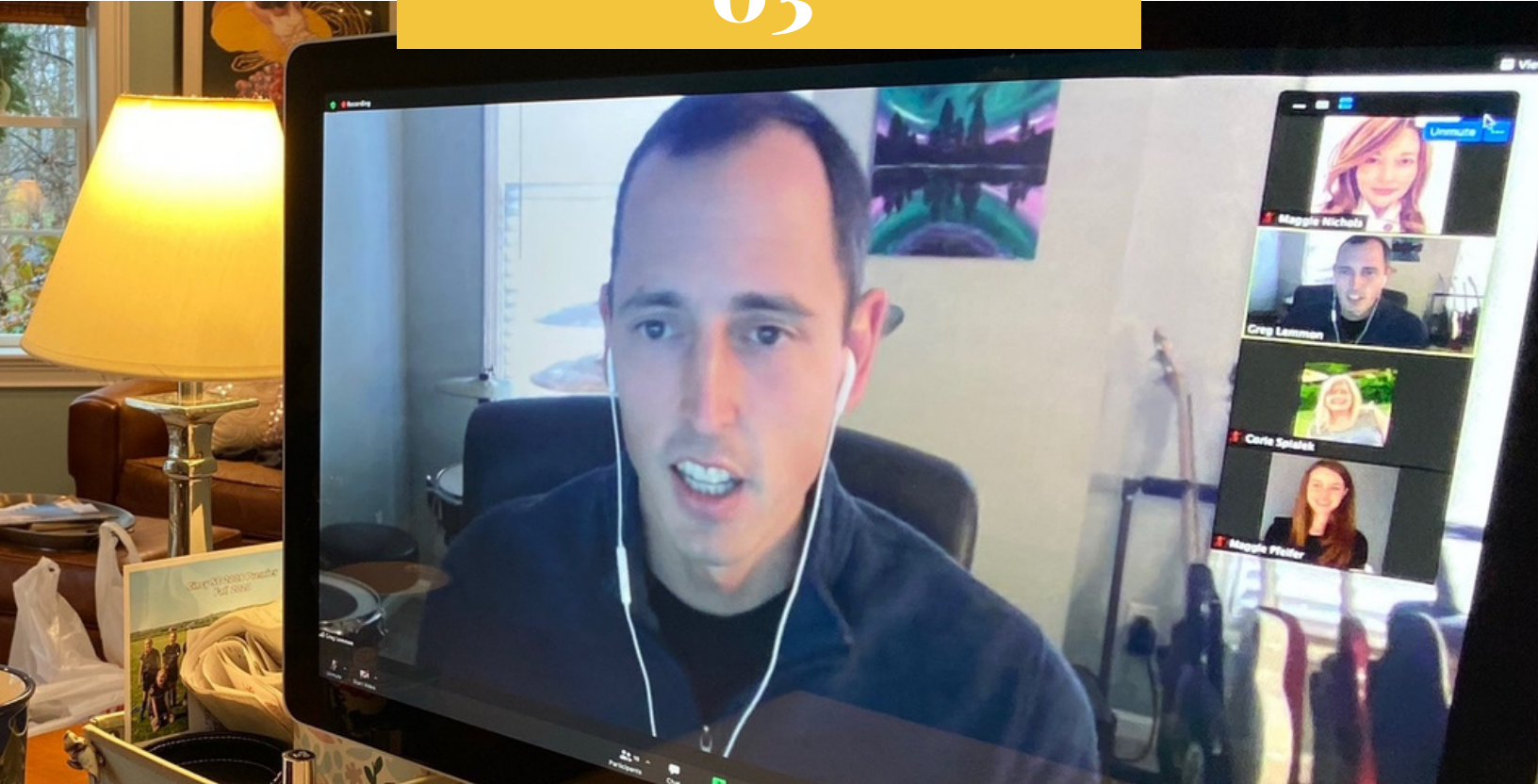
03   Leverage Formal and Informal Leaders

By far the biggest indicator of an IE Blue Belt Cohort's certification rate is the engagement from their leadership. It could be formal or informal leadership in terms of reporting structure. Some groups have a division or department head leading the charge, others have an informal team leader who volunteers to become the internal champion.

Either way, when we've trained groups who have a leader who not only endorses the program, but participates in the training (sometimes for the 2nd or 3rd time!), we see better certification rates (approaching 100%), and participant certification projects with more significant impact on the business.

I reference the certification rate because within IE, certification is not a trivial credential. Certification means that participants endured cycles of feedback on practice assignments and real world application projects until their coach considered the skills mastered.

Maybe you can play that role for a group of trainees. Maybe you can advocate for it. Leadership involvement not only helps with certification, but it typically leads to more structural support for the ways of working that IE teaches that I referenced above.

04   Expand Up and Down the Org Chart

Recall the fear that folks express at the end of training about returning home to a group who doesn't "speak IE." The straightforward solution is to expand training. Here are a few tactics for expansion.

- LMS Accessible Content. A few of our clients who are further along in their cultural adoption of IE have embedded a subset of the video lessons into their LMS. They have the videos available in a series so that anyone can opt in or be referred to become an Innovation Ambassador and eventually level up to deeper skill building and certification programs. This has been an effective way to circulate the language and premise of the iE mindset.

- Engage Senior Leadership. Another natural progression is to expose senior leaders through facilitated workshops where 100% of the time they are thinking and working on how they want to enable their organizations for success. We have a half-day version all the way to a two-day version which can be tailored to the needs of the group. Key questions to start with are the basics of WHAT, WHY, and HOW they want to define and measure innovation and enable people to contribute and execute ideas and solutions across the organization.

- Activate PROACTIVE Problem Solvers. An adaptation of IE that can apply to the broadest possible audience within your organization, this new one-day workshop will teach employees the what, why, and how of PROACTIVE Problem Solving. It shows them how when they see something - they can DO something about it. It enables all employees to be able to contribute meaningful ideas for working smarter and in the process build pride in their work.

- Develop Specialists. Leveling up to the IE Mastery Course and Black Belt Certification can be the right choice for those who are tasked with either leading leap projects, architecting the innovation ecosystem, and/or training others internally on the methods. And eventually, each Black Belt can specialize in one of those areas.

So in summary, to reduce the fear and friction of implementing what you've learned at IE training; 1) lean in to leadership, 2) enable teams and a sense of belonging, 3) make real changes to your schedules and scorecards, and 4) consider expanding up and down the org chart. I hope some of these tactics have inspired you or reassured you with ideas for increasing success with your efforts to practice IE within your role.