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Intrapreneurship – How to Do It and Live to Tell the Tale

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The American Heritage Dictionary defines an intrapreneur as "*A person within a large corporation who takes direct responsibility for turning an idea into a profitable finished product through assertive risk-taking and innovation*". Nice definition, though I doubt that the people in question take the time to think of their activity in such flowery terms; they're too busy dodging the bullets!

Having spent a long career as a change agent in a large corporation (you can read of some examples [here](#)), I know how exciting, how rewarding – and how difficult [Intrapreneurship](#) can be. In this article I want to share some reflections on this practice, and give you my take on how you can undertake it, survive the dangers and get the reward.

What internal entrepreneurship is all about

To my mind, intrapreneurship is mainly about passionately pursuing a conviction not initially shared by one's employer. It means you have an idea that you think will do that employer a lot of good, but it isn't on the current roadmap, hence it requires a change of direction, a deviation from "the way things work around here". The idea in question can be in any domain – a product feature, a new product, a new family of products, a new business process, a new business direction... the operative word being "new", hence against the inertia that organizations are normally encumbered with.

Depending on circumstances, the originator of such an idea can be an individual employee involved in the idea's domain (say, a design engineer with an idea for changing the product's design); an employee from an entirely different domain that happens to have a good idea (say, an engineer with an idea for improving a business process workflow); or a manager at any level with an idea that would turn their group's energies, or those of another group, in a new direction. Sometimes the idea is loosely related to their job description; at other times it isn't. Being passionate, they couldn't care less. But their bosses might!

What's in it for the organization

Of course, their bosses would do well not to object. The benefits of intrapreneurship to bottom line success and long term survival are obvious. Intrapreneurship generates new and improved products, process improvements, cost saving measures – and in unexpected, serendipitous ways that formal processes would never yield. Your employee base, after all, has an intimate knowledge of the business; their ability to generate new ways of making this business pay exceeds that of any outsider, and their passion is a precious resource. Failing to harness such innovative energy can, in the long term, destroy a company.

That said, there are always the fears that any large organization harbors – fear of loss of control, fear of people working outside the system, fear of deviating from plans. Which is why an organization needs to address intrapreneurship in a well thought out manner, as discussed further below.

What's in it for you as an individual

If you're a salaried employee considering this path, you should be aware of what you're getting yourself into. A "career" in serial intrapreneurship has many attributes, notably:

- Independence. A corporate career will never be as free as starting your own business; but driving your own ideas in a company is as close as you can get to that, while staying on a payroll.
- Flexibility. You may still be working nine to five (or six, or seven, or later, more likely) but you accumulate skills, connections, achievements, and a mindset that will let you assert much more control over the rest of your career in the company – or beyond, should you leave that company.
- Risk. Attaching your success to new projects is risky business; you might fail, or your new project may fall easy prey to cost cutting in tough times. On the other hand, these days no job is a lifetime deal – and with any luck you'll prove your value above that of your risk-averse coworkers.
- Never a dull moment. It's a roller coaster ride of ideas, battles, victories, and – yes – defeats. But boring it isn't.

Consider these points – especially the risk – before you decide to become a change agent. It isn't for everyone, and your mileage may vary depending on your innate attributes and on the environment you're working in. If you decide to go for it – as I had – do read the tips and caveats below.

How to make it work: tips for the aspiring intrapreneur

So you have an idea and you want to push it to fruition from the inside... Here are some lessons I've learned over the years that may come in handy.

- Be an optimist. There is a fine line between an energetic intrapreneur and an embittered troublemaker. You'll need all the positive outlook you can garner, and it will make a real difference to your success.
- Know your organizational politics. There is nothing wrong in these – we are all political creatures, and you'll do much better for your cause and your company if you can negotiate, adapt, convince, and collaborate well with managers, coworkers and anyone else affected by your vision.
- It helps if the group you're in is new, or undergoing restructuring to a new form – this ensures still fluid paradigms, where an innovator may have more freedom. Failing that, be sure to have a good understanding of the existing paradigms, strategies and business needs of your group.
- Strive to identify potential coalitions and alliances. Often these will be from outside your organic group: another department may have a greater need for what you propose, and they may have some resources they can divert your way. Sometimes you may want to [go outside your company](#) entirely, joining forces with academia or an industry group.
- Play within the system. As someone's employee, it is your ethical duty to follow the rules; it is also more likely to succeed. Sometimes you can succeed by breaking those rules, acting first and apologizing later; but it might cost you your job instead. Of course, just because you need to work within the rules, nothing says you can't push them to their limit! The best intrapreneurs are those who know how to drive change from the inside while applying every trick available to them. (For an interesting look at some of that, see Debra Meyerson's book [Tempered Radicals](#).)

- Your life will be easier if you can convince a senior manager to share in your vision and sponsor your idea. Failing that, you will need to rely on managers of lesser vision – harder but still doable if you do it right.
- Have patience and perseverance. You'll need them. Be prepared to work under the radar at times, but stay the course; what is stalled today may gain traction tomorrow, all the more so given the breakneck pace of change that characterizes the current century.
- It's important to be single-minded, but don't be self-centered. The fact is, as a maverick you can become a real annoyance to your boss, which is unfair to them and risky for yourself. Be sensitive to what your action looks like from the other side – why people might object, what they fear from your efforts... then try to bring them to your side. If you conclude that you can't do what you want, and it's worth it to you to leave and seek a more suited company (or start your own), that's your call; but if you chose to stay and drive change from the inside, don't alienate everyone else!
- Lastly: remember that even a very successful intrapreneur will fail in some cases (and some failures will even be your fault, which is OK – not all your ideas are as great as they may seem, but you won't find out which ones unless you try them). At Intel I used to joke that if nobody pushes back at my ideas for change, then I'm not trying hard enough. The same goes for failure: at a guess I'd say I succeeded in driving 40% of the changes I'd envisioned to a successful completion, which both I and my employers considered a worthy yield.

How to make it work: what management can do

While the change agents fight for their ideas from below, their management should ask how they might encourage, channel and assist them from above. Many companies grapple with this issue of how to promote innovation and intrapreneurship in their workforce. Some thoughts to consider follow.

- The most critical thing is to create the kind of cultural milieu where trying to drive new ideas is an accepted norm, and where failing at it is safe. Of course merely saying it is so is not enough; this goes to maintaining an empowering company culture that can be hard to create and easy to lose.
- Having a system to encourage individual employees to innovate is useful if you do it right. Google's [20% time](#), or 3M's [15% time](#) (that's the time an employee may devote to personal innovative projects) are good examples that have reaped huge benefits for these companies. Note however that it isn't enough for a system to just *harvest* ideas (in "Suggestion box" style). You want to allow the idea's originator to actually drive development in person, as far as possible.
- In addition to empowering individual intrapreneurs, a company can set up larger structures to foster internal entrepreneurship. The famous [Lockheed Skunk Works](#) model, centered on a specific project, is one way of doing this; another is to set up a special group charged with driving innovation in general. Common to both is a fast track for approving and applying funding for new ideas with minimal bureaucracy.
- Although the ideas come from below, managers have a crucial role to play. Their decisions and attitude can encourage intrapreneurs to do their thing – or crush them, either at the start or at any step along their arduous path. As a manager, you should empower your intrapreneurial subordinates. And yes, I know, they can be a pain... but perhaps you can guide and mentor them on how to be less of a pain while removing the barriers that force them to be that way?

Intrapreneurship for the next generation

Intrapreneurship has been around for much of the past century (though not in earlier ages), but it's interesting to look at how the new, millennial generation – the current wave of new hires – will engage in it.

Certainly these bright young people are ideal entrepreneurial material, immersed as they are in technology and rapid change. Indeed, when it comes to starting new companies they are full of energy and take full advantage of the endless possibilities of this century's brave new world. And yet when it comes to intrapreneurship, they are perhaps at a greater disadvantage than previous cohorts. Here they will need to sell their ideas to managers belonging primarily to Gen X, in a corporate cultural environment they are ill equipped to understand. There is a generational gap here, where the idea generators and the approvers come from very different mindsets; it is in everyone's interest to help bridge it.

This gap is not going unnoticed. I was heartened to see that [StarTau](#), an initiative at Tel Aviv University that teaches students how to engage in entrepreneurship and innovation, is paying attention to teaching intrapreneurship; in fact, they've engaged me to create a special lecture on the subject for their training programs, which imparts to the students insights on how to innovate within a larger enterprise.

If this training can be of use to your organization's managers or employees, [let me know](#).

Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness for 18 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see [here](#). You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com, and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.