In my latest article tying in with my new book *The Innovation Puzzle*, I explain why real innovation can't be delegated. It needs senior leaders who don't just endorse transformation but actively enable it. That means changing priorities, championing risky ideas, and giving innovation teams the resources (and protection) they need to succeed.

Why Innovation Isn't a Junior Job: The Importance of Senior Leadership Buy-In

One important observation I make in *The Innovation Puzzle* is that many organizations delegate innovation downward, passing it on to junior managers, emerging leaders, or isolated innovation teams. These people/groups, often billed as "innovation champions," are enthusiastic and full of potential.

However, operating far from the real levers of power, they're also under-resourced, underprotected, and undermined by the core business. Worst of all, when their efforts inevitably stall, the company often places the blame on them. In reality, the issue is higher up.

The Limits of Bottom-Up Innovation

Innovation champions are often appointed to signal the organization's commitment to new ideas. But as I discussed in a recent post, many of these individuals burn out. Why? Because they're placed in the impossible position of pushing for transformation from the organizational margins.

Without active support from senior leaders, even the best ideas get caught in a tangle of bureaucracy, short-termism, and political resistance. Delegating innovation to junior staff might seem empowering, but in most cases, it amounts to passing the buck. This creates a situation where innovation champions face an uphill battle that will slowly erode their motivation.

What Senior Buy-In Really Looks Like

Real leadership buy-in isn't about endorsing innovation in a strategy slide. It's about action. The key challenge for a firm's senior leaders is to truly believe what they say – "innovation is important to our future" – and ensure that this is congruent with what they do through behavior and actions that support innovation.

It looks like this:

- Championing uncomfortable ideas that challenge current products, processes, or power dynamics.
- Shielding innovators from internal politics and skepticism.
- Changing KPIs and funding models to support long-term, high-uncertainty work. (For more on this, see my earlier article on how financial metrics sabotage innovation success.)
- Assigning top talent to innovation teams – not just to core business priorities. Because if innovation never gets the A-team, what does that say about your true priorities?

Making Senior Buy-In Real

This kind of leadership posture can't be improvised. It must be intentional. Here's how to begin:

- Put innovation on the exec agenda, not just in quarterly retros.
- Assign a senior sponsor to every major innovation initiative – someone who brings credibility and political clout.
- Build capability: help leaders get more comfortable with ambiguity and experimentation.
- Track ownership so you know which leaders are showing up for innovation and which are just coasting on rhetoric.

Effective leaders go beyond merely saying grand things about innovation. They create psychological safety for innovation teams, provide consistent feedback, and ensure candid reporting within the organization.

Final Thought

Innovation can't be outsourced to the middle. If it matters, it belongs at the top.