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Slow Your Roll: Process Innovation Requires Smart Focus

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In cities like Chicago, there's an increased need for speed as technology rushes to meet the voracious business and consumer demand for improvements. "Next-gen" is a thing of the past. New technology is increasingly disruptive.

Our team witnessed these dynamics from the front line as we helped roll out the physical infrastructure needed to make 5G wireless service a reality throughout Chicagoland. The project scope was massive, including the design and installation of nearly 3 million feet of new fiber and thousands of small cells.

It was clear to everyone responsible for deploying this new infrastructure that there was no option but to quickly learn to work in new ways. We needed new solutions to new challenges and new ways of evaluating them. We had to establish nimble processes grounded in the realities of today's complex world. And we had to seamlessly collaborate across all relevant stakeholders.

Most businesses are faced with the same challenge of transforming the way they work to keep pace with the speed and complexity of business opportunities at hand. Unfortunately, operating at the speed of light can rob us of the necessary time and perspective to sort valuable opportunities and solutions from short-term fixes and workarounds.

So how and where do you focus the

process? Based on our experience, there were several actions taken that had the most meaningful and lasting impact as we built our new business model. Pump your brakes and consider one or more to jump-start or focus your efforts.

Look to innovators for best practices.

Take stock of who the innovators are inside and outside your own industry. How do they structure teams? What tools do they use for collaboration? How do they identify, recruit and retain top talent? How do they respond to changes in their business environment?

Make sure your survey includes a look outside your own business orbit. Look for different industries that have faced similar challenges. Their solutions aren't constrained by "the way it's always been done" in your industry.

Our team looked to the technology companies whose products we were building infrastructure to support. It sparked ideas for new ways of structuring teams to break down the internal silos common in engineering organizations, and it helped us to boost communications and to be nimbler in the face of change.

Embrace diversity and new approaches.

You know the saying, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing

over and over and expecting a different result." The same can be said for having the same people in the same room searching for solutions. Make sure there's a full range of backgrounds represented at the table, and create an environment that considers and rewards different, unproven approaches, even though at first it might seem like a more cumbersome process.

Also consider the hiring norms in your industry. Our business, like many others, rewards specialists. Colleges and training programs urge students to focus their studies on a particular discipline in order to bring the most value to organizations. And in our industry, the traditional solution to tackling a more complex problem used to be straightforward: Add a specialist.

But as the market became increasingly more complex, changing in real time, the siloed specialist-only model was unable to generate the outcomes at the speed required. Bringing on generalists who could holistically size up issues and augment the planning process allowed us to bring better solutions to our clients, faster.

Rethink competition and collaboration.

Rethink how and where you compete. Considering a new risk-benefit perspective that embraces openness to working together with competitors when it makes collective sense might get your

further faster than going it alone.

In this “connected” world, we are all interconnected. We no longer have the luxury of simply innovating our own businesses in isolation. The challenges presented to us require more complex solutions that require a broader set of pieces and players.

We looked for opportunities to forge new relationships and build trust. Whether it was various technology providers all bringing service to a booming business and entertainment district or a corporation needing improved infrastructure near the city’s ongoing infrastructure beautification project, choosing transparent collaboration over stealth competition improved our performance and boosted client relationships.

Create a learning culture.

There are a number of benefits to organizations that make a fundamental culture-level commitment to learning. For example, they experience higher productivity, and they are significantly more likely to innovate.

If your goal is to reach a point of ongoing transformation, there might be nothing more powerful than creating a culture of learning and continuous improvement. Set goals at the team level, and then empower everyone with the tools to recognize learning opportunities, give (and receive) effective feedback, and activate and share results.

Leverage data on what’s worked and what hasn’t. This keeps both learnings and decision-making fact-based and

keeps you out of “the way it’s always been done” mindset when and where it counts most. We now take most projects through recalibrations at predetermined intervals as a way to strengthen our continuous improvement culture and guarantee that all work is benefiting from the most current data.

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