83 percent of management jobs in the U.S. fall into the middle layer of their organization.

— U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics

WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

What happens when ideas leave the C-suite? Three leaders share insights on how innovation initiatives succeed—and fail.

Allen Couture, General Manager of Texas Operations, Space and Airborne Systems, Raytheon Co.

Dennis Crosby, Senior Account Director, Sabre Airline Solutions

Katherine Knowles-Marchione, Global Vice President of Customer Engagement and Customer Success, Teradata Corp.

Innovative ideas have little value unless they can be executed, and execution isn't done by those in the C-suite. Whether or not an innovation initiative is successful is left to the managers in the middle. So we took our innovation questions to three of them and asked what it takes to execute on those mandates from the C-suite.

Q. WHAT ARE THE HOTSPOTS A LEADER HAS TO CONSIDER WHEN TASKED WITH EXECUTING AN INNOVATION MANDATE?

➜ **Dennis Crosby:** Can the organization assimilate? Does the team have the right set of skills to execute? Is there sufficient support from other areas of the organization? Can the vision be clearly articulated and understood? What is the current culture, and what are the barriers to execution?

➜ **Allen Couture:** You cannot assume that you have buy-in across the leadership team. The CEO may be on board, but you don't always know which executives are supportive or silently opposed to innovation. They didn't get to that level without some skills in political astuteness. Innovation carries a stereotype of being expensive, risky, and complicated. So be up front and honest about your expectations and address their concerns to reduce the risk of losing support too early in the process.

➜ **Katherine Knowles-Marchione:** You need to make sure whatever you're doing from an innovation perspective involves not only R&D, which traditionally is the tech piece, but that you're also focused on customers, interacting with customers, that you've got the best employees on board, and that you're looking at how the innovation affects the brand. You can be as innovative as you want, but until your customers are experiencing it and using it and telling you they like it or interacting with you and giving you ideas to make it better—you're not innovative until your customers agree that you are.

Q. HOW DO YOU FIGHT AGAINST CORPORATE GRAVITY—THE TENDENCY OF ENTERPRISES TO PULL BACK, WHICH CAN KEEP INNOVATION FROM TAKING FLIGHT?

➜ **Crosby:** By gaining the support and sponsorship of C-team members for the initiative, and by adopting and enforcing a "no turning back" policy.

BE VERY SELECTIVE OF YOUR TEAM. THEIR COURAGE AND ABILITY TO FOCUS ON THE PROMISE WHILE AVOIDING THE TYPICAL CORPORATE RACKETS AND VICIOUS CIRCLES WILL BE CRITICAL FOR SUCCESS.

➜ **Couture:** Be very selective of your team. Their courage and ability to focus on the promise while avoiding the typical corporate rackets and vicious circles will be critical for success.

Also, stay in constant contact with your key stakeholders to maintain support and understanding of what they are concerned with in the process. Invite them into your meetings, reviews, and offsite activities.

➜ **Knowles-Marchione:** We have less of a tendency to pull back at Teradata, because we're so singularly focused. We also don't take anything for granted and we're not afraid to reinvent ourselves. One example is how we went from proprietary hardware and software to open source. We saw trends in the marketplace, and we were not afraid to take advantage of those trends. It all came back to the question: Will this allow us to perform better for our customers? Will it improve their cost and performance? If the answer is yes, then we're going to do it.

Another way we fight against corporate gravity is by being a pretty flat organization. There aren't a lot of layers.

Q. HOW DO YOU GET YOUR TEAM TO EMBRACE THE INNOVATION MANDATE, SO THEY CARRY FORTH THE VISION AS THEIR OWN?

➜ **Crosby:** By empowering the team. Encourage them to make their ideas known—and then validate their ideas.

Celebrate the successes, and learn from mistakes.

➔ **Couture:** Define a noble cause; provide the picture of "what a win looks like." If you have the right players, you will not need to motivate their ownership all the time. It is important as a leader to provide the inspiration for their work and honest coaching during the process.

I have been most successful at implementing complicated innovative ideas by facilitating the conversation and exchange of views, supporting their ideas, and not mandating the steps to get there. Never assume the outcome; it's a shortsighted trait for a leader.

➔ **Knowles-Marchione:** You have to communicate: This is where we are today, this is where we want to take the brand, and these are the technological changes and innovation that's needed to become better and more enlightened with our brand. You have to be able to show employees a vision; no one can work toward a goal without it. The second thing is, you have to pick the right employees. Always pick those who are passionate and who want to really make a difference.

Q. IN THE CONTEXT OF INNOVATION, HOW DO YOU MANAGE UP?

➔ **Crosby:** By providing clear and concise messaging to executives on strategy, next steps, and key milestones, as well as progress achieved thus far. Also, by soliciting their feedback.

➔ **Couture:** I try to establish and communicate expectations and results regularly, then follow up with an opportunity for them to be enrolled in the process. If executives are directly involved with an action, it will help the momentum and morale of your whole team. It sends the message of corporate importance and credibility to your project.

Utilize the network of your C-suite for support, but be prepared to perform on the promise. Strong results will lend to an easier task of managing up; everyone wants to be on a winning team.

➔ **Knowles-Marchione:** If you communicate the vision for the company and the brand initiative and how you're going to change it—that, along with a singular focus, makes managing up a lot easier. It's also important that innovation expands beyond the traditional R&D and goes throughout the organization. You have to be able to innovate with marketing and sales groups, too. The more entrenched the vision becomes, the more you communicate about how you're trying to evolve a transitioning brand, the better employees understand all of that, the easier it is to manage up.

Q. HOW DO YOU SUSTAIN A CULTURE OF INNOVATION? WHAT WORKS?

➔ **Crosby:** For me it is about gaining consensus through collaboration and getting the team to buy in to the vision. Also, establishing key milestones are important; when milestones are met, the team is invigorated by the progress it has achieved. Always continue to solicit ideas, validate, and then incorporate when possible. Implore a "take it to the next level" mindset.

➔ **Couture:** Keep your core goals simple, innovation does not have to equal science project and difficult to maintain. And share the vision across all functions, not just your technical teams. At the end of the day, it will be people outside engineering development who deliver on a repeatable product that adds value to your customers and keeps your economic engine running.

➔ **Knowles-Marchione:** You have to make sure you are following trends in the marketplace, you have to be focused, and you must be communicating with your customers. At Teradata, we have customer committees, made up of traditional business folks, and advisory committees, made up primarily of people from the IT world.

Q. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST SURPRISING OUTCOMES YOU'VE EXPERIENCED AS A RESULT OF INNOVATION EXECUTION?

➔ **Crosby:** Seeing "naysayers" becoming supporters. Seeing the project or initiative "grow legs" and take on a life of its own (in a good way). Experiencing genuine excitement and participation from C-team members.

➔ **Couture:** I have been involved in breakthrough projects that have been able to exceed on their very complex and difficult promises. We have shattered what was expected—by simply taking a stand for what we can be counted on for, and working together toward a common goal. We didn't realize our ideas were not supposed to work and defied what was normal; we were too focused on what was possible to notice.

➔ **Knowles-Marchione:** We have some of the most innovative customers in the world. They are constantly pushing us. We're helping them with their competitive advantage, so that just makes sense. They're dealing with consumers who are becoming increasingly demanding—and smart. Consumers are now interacting with brands through social media, web channels, call centers, and branches or stores, and they're expecting that no matter the channel, they want their interaction to be consistent. They want you to recognize them immediately, and respond to their concerns. Companies want to manage these close relationships as quickly and effectively as possible.