Intrapreneurs: Essential to Building Healthy Academic Communities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Intrapreneurialism is emerging as a powerful force for enhancing organizational transformation and viability in a post-pandemic world. It is the enfranchisement and empowerment of people, liberating them to engage their enterprising talent in the service of creating value for the benefit of the organization (Yashin-Shaw, 2018).

Aim: For the purposes of this article, the notion of a healthy academic community refers to the long-term viability, robustness, and relevance of the institution. Being able to foster future success in the face of exponential change is a hallmark of a resilient organization (Duchek, 2020). In this sense, a healthy academic community is one where the institution and its stakeholders can thrive in the face of unprecedented disruptive change and unexpected conditions by adapting appropriately (Burnard, Bhamra, & Tsinopoulos, 2018). The traditional form and function of higher education are being challenged as new technologies are democratizing access to knowledge, learning, and credentialing. A diversity of higher education options have emerged for students beyond the traditional university (Marshall, 2018). Such challenges can pose an existential threat to universities.

Results: How can academic communities thrive in the face of these rapid changes? The answer is to liberate and engage the enterprising talent of staff, students, faculty, and the extended community associated with the institution, whether local or global, physical or virtual. Enterprising employees, who think and act like entrepreneurs, are called intrapreneurs.

Conclusion: By embracing and supporting intrapreneurs at all levels, academic communities will be well placed to flourish in the new post-pandemic world.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic accelerated many changes that were already underway within higher education like remote working, online teaching and learning, new learning management systems, and multiple access pathways. However, the disruptions and unprecedented technological advancements of the last two years have foreshadowed even more changes and posed new questions. What is the future of credentialing? To what extent will Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) replace traditional degrees and resumes?

Students are increasingly seeking educational experiences from a growing diversity of sources, many of which bear little resemblance to the traditional university (Marshall, 2018). They have access to more materials and experts than ever before, with a possible result that more campuses could shrink, merge, or close (Alexander, 2020). Will the metaverse be a viable alternative to the on-campus experience? What skills do faculty need above and beyond deep subject knowledge expertise? Will blockchain live up to its promise to make educational resources more accessible and affordable? Could micro-credentials cannibalize existing programs? Who and where will our future students be? How can higher education institutions harness emerging technologies? How these challenges are addressed will determine the future health of academic institutions.

The following section defines the terms intrapreneur and intrapreneurialism and makes the case that universities that nurture intrapreneurs and make intrapreneurialism everyone's business will be more able to adapt to continuous change, be future ready, and therefore, more resilient, healthy institutions. Those institutions that empower their staff to be intrapreneurs engender higher levels of engagement (Gawke, Gorgievski, & Bakker, 2017) and fidelity (Hamel & Zanini, 2020) within their workforce which is another indicator of a healthy academic community.

INTRAPRENEURIALISM AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

The term intrapreneur was coined and popularized by Gifford Pinchot the 3rd in his 1985 book *Intrapreneuring: Why You Don't Have to Leave the Corporation to Become an Entrepreneur*. Pinchot (1985) defined intrapreneurs as "Those who take hands-on responsibility for creating innovation of any kind within the organisation" (p. ix). Since then, numerous definitions for intrapreneurs have emerged. Nicolaidis and Kosta (2011) explained that intrapreneurs innovate on behalf of an established organization in which they may have no equity. Gawke et al. (2017) referred to them as employees who expand and rejuvenate the organization to adequately adapt to external and internal developments. Deprez and Euwema (2017) characterized intrapreneurs as individuals who renew and innovate from the bottom up. The common thread is that intrapreneurs create value, growth, or benefit in some way that improves the fortunes of their organization.

Intrapreneurialism can be thought of as an approach to work in which all employees may engage for the benefit of the organization. It is a strategy adopted by an organization to exploit or capitalize on the institution's resources to reshape its ability to progress in new directions and new ways (Smith, 2003). This is a broader conceptualization of intrapreneurial activity than the notion of intrapreneurship, which relates more specifically to the setting up of an internal start-up business within an organization for the purpose of creating a new revenue stream. Intrapreneurship is the practice of developing a new venture within an existing organization, to exploit a new opportunity and create economic value (Parker 2011). Indeed, an internal start-up is driven by intrapreneurs. However, it is argued that there are many other ways of adding value and increasing the viability and robustness of an organization beyond creating an internal start-up. Such ventures typically require dedicated resources in the form of a separate unit within the organization to launch a new product or service.

The broader definition of intrapreneurialism allows for the inclusion of a wide range of activities driven by enterprising employees, intrapreneurs, that can contribute to the health and resilience of an organization. These activities can range from improved processes, the adoption of new technology, and new ways of engaging and serving customers, which in the case of a university, is the students.

It stands to reason that institutions with a critical mass of active and empowered intrapreneurs will be more likely to rise to whatever challenges present themselves in an increasingly complex and dynamic world. As Hamel

and Zanini (2020, p. 24) posit in their book *Humanocracy*, "An organization has little to fear from the future or its competitors, when it's brimming with self-managing micropreneurs." *Micropreneurs* are individual intrapreneurs.

Universities now exist in a world where diverse and complex forces reshape them and the ecosystems in which they operate. Thus, universities need intrapreneurs at all levels who will identify and champion the kind of change that will strengthen the organization's fortunes and resilience in an uncertain future.

Intrapreneurs possess a suite of skills that make them ideally suited for helping their organization address existential challenges and are key players in leading the organization into the future. The intrapreneur's skillset as explored in the following section, is valuable and relevant for all university employees (i.e., faculty, staff, and others) within the ecosystem. It is a contemporary skillset that enables people to be catalysts of change no matter their role. If there are enough intrapreneurs using this skillset to facilitate change throughout the academic community then this will result in higher levels of responsiveness within the organization. This in turn enables it to adapt effectively to complex changes which is an indicator of a healthy academic community.

THE INTRAPRENEURIAL SKILLSET

The intrapreneurial skillset (Yashin-Shaw, 2018) is an amalgam of personal leadership, cognitive flexibility, and future focus. Each macro-category is characterized by various sub-skills as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Intrapreneurial Skillset Including Macro-Categories and Sub-Skills
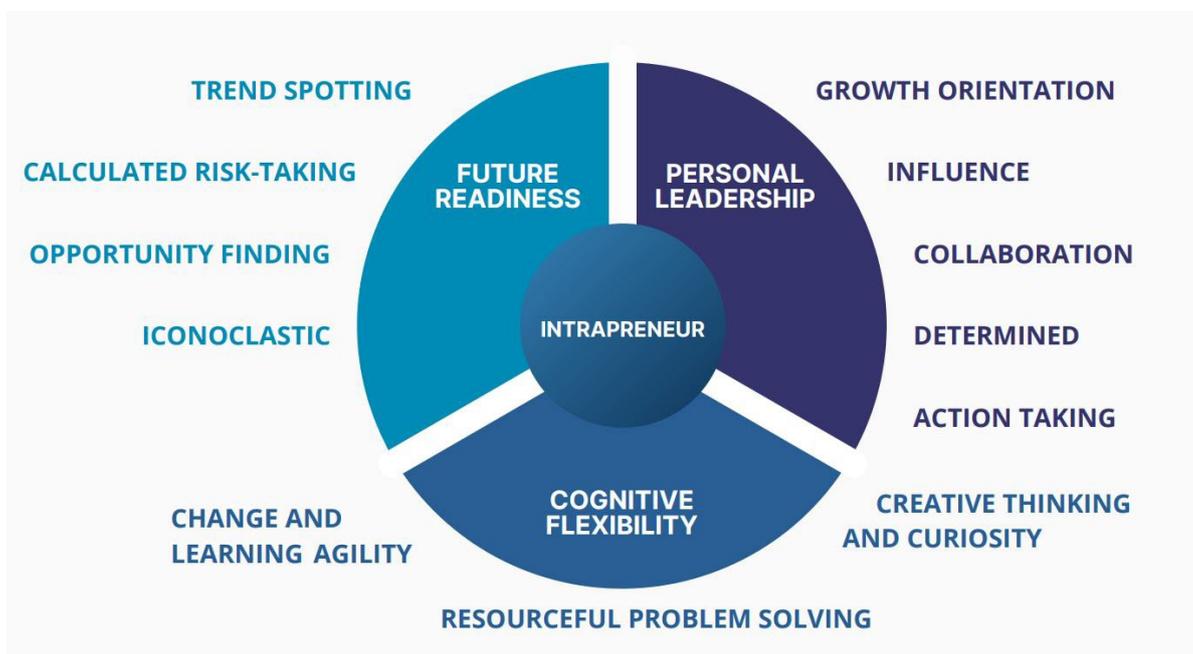
Personal Leadership

Personal leadership is the ability to bring out the best in oneself and behave in a way that facilitates success in undertakings.

Growth orientation. Intrapreneurs have a growth mindset which means that they are prepared to try new things, step out of their comfort zone, and experiment with different ideas. They are prepared to pay the price of

discomfort for the potential rewards of achievement, new experiences, and personal evolution. The opposite of this is a fixed mindset that does not like to be challenged.

Influence. Bringing intrapreneurial initiatives to fruition usually requires intrapreneurs to enlist cooperation from others. This requires influencing skills to gain traction for their ideas. This is particularly important if one doesn't have positional power. Intrapreneurs are usually genuinely and authentically passionate about their ideas which makes them highly persuasive.

Collaboration. Intrapreneurs are good collaborators because they know that pooling skills and resources from different sources is more likely to deliver better outcomes and innovative solutions. Collaboration is important to intrapreneurialism because it is the enabler for recruiting and synthesizing expertise from diverse areas. It is a means by which we can leverage the creativity and knowledge of different people. Pooling skills and perspectives from different sources, be they inside or outside the organization, means intrapreneurs are more likely to get better outcomes and more innovative solutions. They have often spent considerable time and effort in building their network recognizing that this increases their potential for effective collaborations.

Determination. Intrapreneurs have learned to persist in the face of frustrations and barriers to bring ideas to fruition. Consequently, they have developed the grit, courage, persistence, and resolve to dig deeper and in the process, discover their hidden potential. Such experiences make them more resilient.

Action-taking. Intrapreneurs are action takers recognizing that simply having great ideas does not create value unless they are put into action. They are prepared to solve problems en route, knowing that it is impossible to plan everything in advance when dealing with complex projects. They trust themselves to find solutions to problems as they arise.

Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the capacity to transcend rigid mental models, engage in multidisciplinary thinking, cross boundaries, and adapt thinking quickly and easily in response to emerging or changing situational demands. It enables people to function effectively in new situations without becoming overwhelmed.

Creative thinking and curiosity. Creative thinking and curiosity are essential precursors for innovation. They prompt intrapreneurs to use their imagination to envision a different future.

Resourceful problem-solving. Resourceful problem-solving is the ability to find clever and efficient ways of overcoming challenges or unexpected situations using limited available resources. There are multiple ways that resourcefulness can be expressed, but it's always with the goal of finding innovative solutions, even when the resources for doing so are not immediately apparent.

Change and learning agility. Change and learning agility are inextricably linked. They are two sides of the same coin. Change agility is the ability to anticipate and adapt quickly to shifting circumstances. Learning agility is the ability to acquire new knowledge and skills as and when we need them in the face of that change.

Future Readiness

Future readiness is the confidence to deal effectively with the potential disruptions of an exponentially changing world.

Iconoclasm. An iconoclast is someone who challenges the status quo, asks the difficult but critical questions, and calls out default thinking and business-as-usual practices that no longer serve the organization. The term

applies to employees who break the boundaries of established thinking to lead the charge for innovation, adaptation, and progress.

Opportunity finding. Opportunity finding means seeing the possibility to change something for the better or create something new that adds value or improves the fortunes of the organization or people's lives in some way. All successful entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs do this. They are opportunity finders because they look at the world through a unique lens that helps them to see possibilities where others do not.

Calculated risk-taking. Intrapreneurs are calculated risk-takers. They will do their due diligence, so they are not reckless, but they are prepared to experiment and try new things.

Trend spotting. Trend spotters look ahead of the curve and pay attention to what is happening in their industry as well as further afield. They are well informed because they seek information from a wide variety of sources and can use that information to make better decisions.

Employees who pursue, develop, and demonstrate this suite of skills are more likely to behave as positive change agents who proactively look for opportunities to create value for their organization. They will be key players in driving innovation and helping their teams and departments to respond creatively to challenges before them.

DISCUSSION

Intrapreneurs who develop and demonstrate the skills and qualities discussed above are a new breed of leaders, even though they may not be in official leadership positions. In this context, leadership may be demonstrated by "the most junior staff through their energy and engagement in the daily operational challenges and their being empowered to suggest and provoke change based on their experience" (Marshall, 2018, p. 4). They are instrumental in leading the organization into a healthy future. Intrapreneurialism puts people, i.e., intrapreneurs, at the heart of the organizational change and transformation journey. Using intrapreneurs to solve organizational challenges ensures that the people who really understand the issues, history, context, and inevitable web of interconnections across the organization that encompasses people, resources, and processes, are the ones solving the problems. It makes sense to use the people who are already working within the system because, after all, they are well-positioned to bring their depth of insight and understanding to the situation.

Intrapreneurial institutions draw and capitalize on the deep understanding of organizational culture and practices found in committed employees. Successful innovation relies on intrapreneurs using their intimate knowledge of the organizational ecosystem to help bring complex projects and transformational change initiatives to fruition. Some organizations turn to external consultants to solve their internal problems while under-utilizing the expertise within their own ranks. With the best will in the world, it is difficult for even highly experienced consultants to develop a truly deep, intricate, and intimate knowledge of an institution in a reasonable time frame. The investment may be put to better use by skilling up and resourcing intrapreneurs who then keep that knowledge, experience, and expertise in-house to add to the institution's knowledge base. Looking first within the existing workforce for people who are hungry to develop their skills and are prepared to invest the time and effort in acquiring them is essential to liberating intrapreneurial talent.

The intrapreneurial skillset described in the previous section can be deployed in multiple ways, from junior staff bringing fresh eyes to digitizing procedures to increase productivity or through senior researchers who find opportunities for commercializing research resulting in new revenue streams for the university. The cumulative effect of a broad range of intrapreneurial activity can result in a more resilient institution (Smith, 2003).

An obvious group within academic communities who may be considered intrapreneurs are faculty, as many conduct research or scholarship, develop businesses, and create scientific discoveries that build science and may produce marketable products. However, it is important to recognize that staff brings broad expertise from IT, human resources, and educational technology that extends across the educational, laboratory, and organizational structures of an academic setting. Similarly, students may enter with either an intrapreneurial skillset or be exposed to and develop one across their educational experience. Healthy academic communities build upon all opportunities to inspire, innovate, and implement the intrapreneurial qualities and outcomes of all their team members.

Intrapreneurs make their greatest contributions within organizations that develop and empower them to be positive change agents. Empowerment is about giving people discretion, latitude, and autonomy over their work so that they can evolve and apply the skills discussed in the previous section. This empowerment invariably leads to higher levels of performance, motivation, confidence, self-reliance, self-determination, and self-management, which leads to higher levels of job satisfaction, productivity, effectiveness, and happiness (Kumar & Kumar, 2017). Empowered employees have a higher sense of purpose. Millennials who feel their jobs have meaning or that they can make an impact through their employers exhibit greater levels of loyalty (Deloitte, 2017), which in turn contributes to the health of the organization.

CONCLUSION

The pursuit and adoption of intrapreneurialism in organizations to improve their health, resilience, and long-term viability is an emerging area of research. The utilization of the intrapreneurial skillset in healthy academic communities is demonstrable and of emergent concern. The intrapreneurial skillset, as presented in this article, is adaptable, transferable, and relevant to intrapreneurs across all areas of the academic community. If liberated, nurtured, and harnessed appropriately within an academic community, intrapreneurial talent can help build resilience and responsiveness. The health of the institution and its future depends upon the skills of its intrapreneurs. A critical mass of these valuable employees is essential for an academic community seeking to stay relevant, viable, and healthy in a disrupted world.

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Author's Note

There is no conflict of interest noted.

ERRATUM

8/23/2022: Corrected reference to Pinchot (1985) on page 23.