How to Create a Culture of Intrapreneurs

An intrapreneur is an employee who thinks and acts like an entrepreneur inside an existing organisation. They spot opportunities, question assumptions, test ideas and take responsibility for outcomes, without needing permission for every move. They don't wait to be told what to do. They look for what needs to be done. They do the right thing by the company, even if that makes it more difficult for them.

Most companies don't stagnate due to a lack of talent; they stagnate because a culture of fear and self-protection sets in. When that happens, people stop showing initiative, and risk becomes something to avoid rather than manage. Over time, those once capable and courageous individuals turn into cautious administrators. Encouraging intrapreneurship creates momentum and encourages innovation. It distributes decision-making to a wider range of stakeholders and gives people permission to take risks they may not otherwise take. Most importantly, it gives ambitious people a reason to stay.

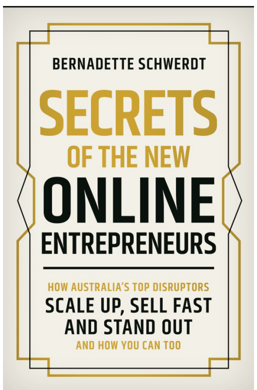
An attitude of intrapreneurship doesn't magically appear in an organisation. It needs the right conditions to flourish: clear and transparent language about what will be rewarded and what won't; regular forums that provide feedback on the initiatives being put forward; and leaders who understand the difference between taking smart risks versus indulging reckless behaviour.

Luxury Escapes offered a clear example of what supporting intrapreneurship looks like. Its co-founder, Adam Schwab, had a blunt explanation for why so many companies stagnate. 'A lot of middle managers are averse to taking a risk. If they take a risk and it goes wrong, they get fired. If they take a risk and get it right, somebody else gets the credit.' Innovation can't flourish in that kind of environment. Adam encouraged the opposite approach. 'We want people to take risks; not stupid risks, but smart ones with asymmetric upside. If it works, the payoff is significant. If it doesn't, it's a two-way door and we can step back.'

That thinking is embedded in the company's DNA. Reversible, two-way-door decisions are encouraged, which normalises courage and rewards bold action. One-way-door decisions are treated differently because once you commit, you can't easily undo them. These decisions affect brand, cash flow and people, and require slower, more considered thinking. Adam makes it clear that ideas might start with one person, but they're shaped by many. 'One person may have the idea, but 100 people might work on it,' he said. Even when a senior manager comes up with an initiative like the TripPlanner, a tool that lets customers plan, organise and book an end-to- end holiday itinerary in one place. It's the product managers, engineers and commercial teams who run with it, pull it apart and rebuild it into something better.

The company runs fortnightly product showcases to keep everyone connected to the work being done by other teams. 'The product managers present what they've worked on in the last fortnight and what's coming next, so everybody can see what's happening,' Adam explained. 'It inspires others to step up and put their ideas forward because they know their work has a genuine chance of being progressed.'

Culture isn't built through grand gestures. It's created by incremental actions; the words leaders use the meetings they commit to and the risks they reward. Together, they create an invisible framework of accountability that inspires teams to take calculated risks and act less like employees and more like business owners.



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