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Donna Thompson - Annotated version of Innovation #3.

Embracing a high-risk/high-rewards project to move to the next level

(Story by R. Borasi; Annotations by R. Borasi & C. Flahive)

Donna's Profile

After nine years of teaching, Donna, a former history teacher, decided to join a small firm that provided professional development services, mostly to corporations. A few years later, as this firm was on the verge of bankruptcy, she and a colleague decided to buy the company and "turn it around." Their vision was to refocus the company on supporting the organization of effective meetings for both corporations and professional associations, as a vehicle to provide worthwhile learning experiences for working professionals. After several years of hard work and innovative practice, the company became very successful, increasing their annual revenues more than tenfold. Donna's case-study includes the in-depth reconstruction of three transformational innovations: (1) taking over and turning around a bankrupt company, (b) re-inventing the company by embracing new technologies, and (3) moving the company to the next level by taking on a high-risk/high-reward project.

How the idea came about and was evaluated/refined

Another turning point for the company was the decision in 1999 to bid for the production of a very high-profile meeting, and eventually being awarded that contract. As the Clinton administration went about revamping the budgets for all the major government departments, they decided to hold a White House Conference on Travel and Tourism to facilitate their goal of setting up public-private partnerships between big companies and government agencies to promote travel and tourism all around the world. They asked MPI to nominate some companies that could take on the organization of such a conference, and Fusion was among the names MPI provided. So Fusion was invited to bid for the contract of this White House Conference along with four other companies.

C1 Receiving information about possible opportunities from one's network

Donna and her partners immediately realized that organizing a conference of such high profile and involving a lot of potential big clients, would provide a unique marketing opportunity for their company. They also recognized that it would establish Fusion as one of the premiere meeting companies in the country:

G3 Evaluating the benefits the initiative could provide to the organization

“It was ... the biggest marketing opportunity you will ever have that you get paid for. Every leader in the industry, the travel industry, was at this conference. Every government leader was at that conference. Every person in the world that we ever wanted to get in front of ... and because of the nature of the conference and that we were producing it, we were interfacing with every one of those people on a direct level. So despite the fact that ... we knew it was going to be the biggest nightmare of our lives to produce, [we wanted to do it].” (Donna)

While funding would not be an issue, since the client would pay for the costs if they won the bid, Donna and her partners knew upfront that they did not have in-house all the human resources and equipment that they would need to produce a meeting of this size. However, they were confident that they could find ways to come up with them, especially since in the past they had already been in positions where they had to rely on the services of some free-lancers and had cultivated good relationships with several of them.

M2 Not letting current lack of resources prevent the pursuing of a worthwhile initiative

K2 Evaluating risk in light of one's unique knowledge of the situation and past experiences

More significant for them was the realization that taking this contract on would mean not only a lot of work, but also a big risk, as if they failed, they would fail in front of everyone!

K1 Evaluating both 'missing the boat' and 'sinking the boat' risks

“Big opportunity, big, BIG risk. ... You fail on C-Span in front of the President of the United States and let me tell you that's a big risk.” (Donna)

Yet they knew this was too good an opportunity for visibility to turn it down – so they went full speed into preparing a proposal to bid for the contract by the set deadline.

M5 Making a decision about whether to pursue the innovation quickly so as not to lose the window of opportunity

Planning and gathering the needed resources

To bid for the contract, they were required to prepare a written proposal following specific guidelines and present it to the committee making the selection.

A2 Preparing a formal written plan as needed to meet the requirements set by an external audience (i.e., to receive needed approval, or get funding)

They realized soon that a good proposal would not be enough, they needed to include some innovative elements that would differentiate them from the other companies also bidding for this major contract. One way they thought they could accomplish this was by employing a new technology they had recently heard of, that would allow participants, from their seats, to vote on specific items, and those votes could be immediately tallied and reported back to the audience.

They realized that they were taking a big risk taking on such a new untried technology. To minimize those risks, they contacted the technology developers to make sure that the technology really worked well and to request that the company be willing to partner with them if the contract was awarded.

B3 Forecasting potential problems and developing plans to deal with them

G1 Looking for creative ways to secure the needed equipment and facilities at minimal cost

D2 Seeking partnerships to secure resources not available in the organization

As this preliminary exploration gave good results and the company agreed to partner with them, Fusion decided to include the new technology in their proposal.

Yet they also decided to double the equipment and the personnel working the equipment, just in case something went wrong!

A6 Creating backup plans

B3 Forecasting potential problems and developing plans to deal with them

They knew upfront that this project would be so big that they would need to hire free-lancers as well as partner with other companies to pull it off. They were ready and prepared to enact

F3 Using free-lancers or short-term contracts rather than hiring new staff for an initiative

these additional measures, and they were successful in soliciting and gathering the cooperation of these free-lancers and other companies.

F4 Creating partnerships to secure expertise and human resources one does not have

“We knew we could do it with all the other contacts we had in the industry ... because we had been using peripheral folks for these other meetings that we’ve talked about before so we knew we could pull those people in.” (Donna)

D3 Capitalizing on social networking to secure partnerships, support, access, fund-raising, etc.

Implementing and monitoring the initiative

When they actually got the contract, Donna recalled that she and her partners looked at each other and said “and now HOW are we going to do it?” Indeed, a lot of planning and decisions would have to take place now to make such a major conference a success.

A1 Continuing to refine the plan through implementation decisions

Donna decided to take on the role of project manager for this initiative, given its significance and thus the importance of paying careful attention to a lot of details in the implementation.

A12 Overseeing the initiative directly

A3 Paying attention to details to ensure a successful implementation

This also allowed her to closely monitor the implementation and notice any possible need to make modifications and immediately act, as necessary.

B1 Monitor informally by paying close attention to how the implementation unfolds

Producing the meeting included not only organizing and running the meeting per-se, but also facilitating preliminary meetings in Washington to come up with the initiatives to be discussed at the meeting. This process took a long time and required Donna to spend three or four days a week in Washington. During these planning sessions, Donna fully capitalized on her

A2 Making changes in the plan as called for by monitoring the results

A4 Doing what it takes to get things done

teaching experience, as she would walk in with clear goals in mind and share those goals with the participants. She would then facilitate the participants' thinking by constantly asking questions and re-organizing contributed ideas into "chunks" using different visual aids.

"Here's what I want to accomplish in this visit – but you didn't do all of the telling, you asked questions, you got it from them and you helped them organize it so that at the end you had in your head the blocks and you plugged their information into blocks so I would do it in front of them so I would have a whole wall full of paper and I would have columns and when they would say things I would go to one and I would write it down and by the end of the day all of a sudden they would look up and they would have an initiative...they used to say 'how did we do that, I didn't know we got that far'." (Donna)

As the conference took place, they also had to be able to continually trouble-shoot and make changes in their plans as needed. For example, once during the conference one of the key stakeholders challenged the decisions made for one session at the very last minute, and Donna had to change the wording and program arrangement half an hour before the meeting started – even though all prior scripts and prompts had already been stored in the equipment used for conducting in-the-moment polls. Their insight about doubling equipment and the personnel running it had paid off in this occasion!

A5 Being creative and persistent in solving problems and challenges

A2 Making changes in the plan as called for by monitoring results

Despite these occasional problems, the conference in the end of a great success.

Ensuring sustainability and/or bigger impact

NOT RELEVANT as it is a "one-time" initiative