

When You Empower Your Team, Innovation Is No Longer a Question of "If," but "When"

by Joe Easley

I'm the proud father of two little kids: my son is four, and my daughter is seven. Four or five weeks ago, we were sitting outside and we had a water gun laying around. Pretty typical stuff for a warm spring day. But as my son held the water gun in his hands, I saw the look in his eyes and I knew exactly what it meant. I said to him: "Do not shoot your sister with your water gun." No people, no animals—that's our rule with anything gun-related in my house. I figure because he's a boy, he's going to play with toy guns. That's just the way things are. But I can certainly tone it down.

A few seconds later, my son did exactly what you probably already figured he was going to do. He walked up to his sister, he got her attention, and he squirted her with the water gun right in the stomach. So she did what sisters do: She grabbed a cup of water on the table outside and threw it right in his face.

Instantly, he freaked out. He kept saying, "Why did you do that?!" She replied calmly, simply, "Because you squirted me with your water gun!"

Suddenly, I didn't have to do anything. Lesson learned. Cause and effect were very beautifully in action that day.

From my point of view, this was also a fairly concise illustration of why failure isn't just important—it's a critical part of human evolution. My son made a mistake, and he needed to learn from it. He broke a rule and he paid the consequences. Once he got a taste of those consequences, he didn't break the rule again. It's a point he probably wouldn't have understood had he not made the mistake in the first place.

Now, he's learned how to have fun and play with his water gun without antagonizing his sister. He learned and he innovated—the same way we all do.

It's that last point—innovation—that is essential to so many aspects of our lives, but especially in terms of the success of a company. I've been with my current company, [Odyssey](#), for many years. But I didn't always have the role I have now. I transitioned from a previous position doing similar work with high volume scanning and digital processing. Odyssey was my first exposure to logistics and supply chain management. Over my tenure here, I've grown to love the challenge of it all.

Onward and Upward, One Failure at a Time

Several years into working at Odyssey, an opportunity opened up to pilot a new organizational structure within our business unit. Two different departments were consolidated into one, and

company leaders looked for a manager. It was a chance I jumped at. It was hard, but I've always been a problem solver and I've never been afraid to try new things. I've also never been afraid to fail at things, so all told it was a perfect fit for me. I ended up joining a highly collaborative and innovative team that was tasked with building strategy and solutions, and now have transitioned into a Qlik Administrator role as a result of our newfound emphasis on business intelligence.

As I started to spend more time in this role, I quickly discovered the need for real business intelligence within the company. We knew that to keep up with our competitors and to add as much value as possible for our customers, we needed some type of solution to act as the light to shine the way. We required a system that would help take our entire business to the next level.

With the right technology at the heart of a company, innovation almost becomes a foregone conclusion.

Whatever shape this new system would take, we knew there were a few requirements it had to meet. It had to be a non-cloud, totally on-premise solution to allow us to maintain complete control over the entire operation. Some self-service would be required. In addition, it had to be flexible enough to extend into a true "visibility" platform on the front-end. It also had to do all of these things at roughly the same time.

Again, being someone who is not afraid to fail, I went out there with a few colleagues and got my hands dirty, so to speak. We tried a myriad of different solutions during the discovery phase of the project, but none of them were the right fit. We devoted almost all of 2016 to finding this solution and, after a huge chunk of time, we had almost nothing to show for it. But it was fine, because I knew that every time we failed we were one step closer to our eventual success.

The Right Solution for the Right Task at the Right Time

When we found [Qlik](#)—the BI platform—I almost immediately recognized it as the solution that ticked all of our various boxes. I loved that it was so straightforward—using the Qlik platform and learning the language were an absolute breeze. In fact, once Qlik was implemented, it quickly became a critical point in the larger Odyssey systems.

All throughout our implementation, the Qlik Consulting team was incredible. They not only did our entire installation, but they completed a lot of consulting work for us up front. They helped to get data extractions built, and they trained us incredibly well. Qlik's team truly set us up to succeed.

But almost more importantly than anything else, this period allowed our team to come together to finally form something much more powerful as a collective than we could be on our own. It paved the way for us to find new, creative solutions that would ultimately help us

deepen the relationships between Odyssey and our customers. Visibility has been the greatest result from our new system.

Brand New Insights

Some of our customers have product sensitivity in one way or another. A plastics customer might not be sensitive to the weather—after all, we're literally talking about plastic—but their products are time sensitive because they make plastic pellets for larger manufacturing processes. Those processes, as I'm sure you can imagine, are very expensive when they go down.

For that client, we set up an app to help filter for weather conditions that are more likely to create a time delay. There are four levels of severity, but they only use the top two: cold and rain alerts. The system is extremely accurate. It's a way for us to be more proactive about their pain points, and it's a tool they can use to mitigate risk.

Because our teams have more client-specific knowledge like this, our insights are much better and less general. We're now in a better position to say things like: "We recommend this product ship in a heated truck." Fun fact: it's almost impossible to get a heated truck in Augusta, Georgia. Since we know that, we don't look like fools if something is shipping out of Augusta and we say it should ship with heat. Now, we say: "We recommend you delay shipment until the weather changes." We can give our clients actionable advice they'd never have access to before. Every conversation we have with our clients now proves our value to them.

Better insights mean every conversation lets you prove value to your customers. @Qlik

We have another set of clients who aren't as time or product sensitive, but still appreciate these insights. They also receive an email informing them of any risks with their shipment. This allows them to notify their customers that a shipment might be late. Even though they have fewer demands, these alerts show them we always have their back.

And it's not just weather. We also map our active shipments. This lets our client teams explore what our network looks like and where our shipments cluster. The map also gives our client teams visibility to shipping patterns in real time. We now have insights into where coverage problems might exist. The higher the density of the black, the easier it is to get coverage on an outgoing shipment, because all those black dots are trucks at the end of their route. They're going to be empty and they need to go somewhere else.

This has sparked a lot of conversations with our team about what's possible with our data. We've only started to uncover all of the possibilities.

Leaning Into the Implementation Process

When implementing a solution like this, your company needs to have complete management buy-in as early on in the process as possible. Without support from the highest levels within an organization, a project is doomed before it has a chance to get off the ground.

This also includes having a highly detailed, carefully designed communications plan. This level of implementation is an "all hands on deck" situation, and you need people to understand what they need to do, when they need to do it, and why it's so important.

Likewise, it's important to guarantee that all milestones—and your larger roadmap in general—are explicitly laid out to put a major emphasis on focus above everything else. Without focus, you may be headed in the right direction, but a project can spiral out of control before you know it.

Organizational focus means employees understand how their work feeds into the larger mission.

People may know what they're doing in a literal sense, but they lose track of the "why" of it all. At any moment, everyone should be able to identify how their actions feed directly back into the larger goal and move everyone a bit farther down the line. If you don't have that, you've lost focus, and if you've lost focus, you've lost everything.

Empowering Information Is About Empowering People

At the end of the day, everything we've changed and learned since the implementation of Qlik has all tied directly back into the same basic idea. It's allowed us to change the way we look at information, and it has dramatically affected what we're able to do with that information.

Today, our team is empowered. They finally function as the living, breathing whole they were always meant to be. They're in a better position to collaborate with one another.

This, in turn, has put us in an incredible position to innovate. We've done so with a much deeper understanding of our customers and the product journey they're currently on.

Before Qlik, we couldn't be as confident in our recommendations to customers. There was a lot of "Here is what we think you might need, maybe" going around. Now, we can start with the customer and build our way back to the action. "Here is what we know you'll need, and here is how this is going to make your job better."

Just like my son, we had to make mistakes to learn from them. Now that we have, the fun can begin.