The Role Of Communication In Successful Innovation
Improve The Innovation Process With Clearly Defined Innovation Language

by Doug Williams
February 19, 2014

ABSTRACT
Innovation is a key objective for countless businesses. But data from our exclusive survey of innovation practitioners indicates that few firms take the time to create a clear language of innovation, and formal innovation classification systems are also rare. Our data shows that poor communication is a common occurrence, and that it is creating unnecessary barriers to the innovation process. This report provides a comprehensive view of the challenges that arise when employees don’t have a common language of innovation, and lays out a set of recommendations for developing a relevant language of innovation that can improve the efficiency of your innovation process.
The Role Of Communication In Successful Innovation
Improve Innovation Efforts With Clearly Defined Innovation Language

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INNOVATION PRACTITIONERS LACK A COMMON CORPORATE LANGUAGE OF INNOVATION

Communication has become increasingly important within business. No longer are employees gathered in one building, or one city, or one country – they are dispersed throughout the state, country, or world, connected by technology. With effective communication – both in terms of skills and technological channels – companies are able to render moot the time zones and distances that separate their disparate workforces.

Companies work hard to communicate effectively. While this is obvious for the numerous one-to-one interactions that take place on a daily basis between co-workers, managers and direct reports, and executive and employees, it is also true for corporate positions, views, or strategies that must be shared amongst all workers. Many companies spend ample time developing and communicating their core corporate principles – as well they should. But how good are they at developing and communicating the corporate principles about innovation? And what risks do they run by failing to do just that?

Mission, Vision, and Values Create Focus And Alignment On Corporate Purpose

Corporate leaders and human resources professionals spend significant energy developing corporate mission statements, visions for the future, and lists of values embodied by the organization when delivering on the corporate mission and vision. Those objectives are important because they drive employees toward a common goal and help the outside world understand what the company does, what it wants to be, and what is important to the company.

A survey of innovation practitioners conducted in Q3 2013 by IX Research demonstrates just how prevalent these corporate messages are:

- **Mission statements define the business and what makes it unique.** Mission statements are the most common of the three corporate messages. Eighty-three
percent of innovation practitioners claim that their company has a clearly defined
mission statement, and nearly three-fourths (74%) know what it is (see Figure 1).1
(Kudos, HR!)

- **Vision statements create a future view of what the company will become.**
  Vision statements are also relatively common: two-thirds (67%) of innovation
  practitioners claim that their firms have a clearly defined vision statement. However,
  vision statements are slightly less memorable, as only a bit more than half (56%)
  report knowing what it is. There is definitely room for improvement here:
  corporate executives who haven’t yet done so should define the firm’s aspirations
  for the future, and human resources should do a better job broadcasting that
  message.

- **Corporate values characterize the important qualities of the products,
  services, or work performed by the employees.** Seventy-four percent of
  innovation practitioners report that their organizations have a clearly defined list of
  corporate values, and 63% know what those values are.

**Figure 1: Firms develop and evangelize key corporate messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes, and I know it is</th>
<th>Yes, but I don’t know it is</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
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<td>11%</td>
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<td>Corporate values</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding.
Source: IX Research Survey, Q3 2013
Corporate Messages Remind Employees Of What Is Important To The Firm

Innovation practitioners indicate that these types of corporate messages are more than just slogans. When each of the three corporate messages (mission, vision, and values) are present, most innovation practitioners indicate that it serves the purpose of keeping employees focused and aligned on what is important to the company overall (see Figure 2). Even if not all employees have these messages committed to memory, they are usually within a (virtual) arm’s reach of the employee, whether through a corporate intranet, flyer, poster, email, or a colleague. These messages are defined, communicated, supported throughout the organization, and provide employees with common core objectives for the firm, regardless of what individual job an employee might have.

Figure 2: Corporate messages focus employees on company objectives

How helpful is your company’s clearly defined ... in keeping you focused and aligned on what is important to the company overall?
(Responses on a scale of 1 [not at all helpful] to 5 [very helpful])
(Responses for "helpful" and "very helpful" shown)

<table>
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<th>Message</th>
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<td>Mission statement</td>
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<td>Corporate values+</td>
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Base: 70 innovation practitioners with a corporate mission statement
Base*: 56 innovation practitioners with a corporate vision statement
Base+: 62 innovation practitioners with corporate values

Source: IX Research Survey, 3Q 2013

A Company-Wide Language Of Innovation Is Rare

No one would deny that innovation is a hot topic these days. In fact, 68% of the innovation practitioners we surveyed claim that innovation is at least a top-3 priority in their companies. Despite the apparent importance of innovation, there is little evidence of companies taking the time and effort to develop a common language of innovation that cuts across the corporation –
which stands in stark contrast to the data about corporate messaging around mission and vision statements and corporate values.

Most companies lack consistency in defining key terms, instead relying on individuals (and in some cases, teams or departments) to come up with their own definitions, which may be different from those employed by others.

- **Most innovation practitioners have a clear definition of innovation**… Only 2% of innovation practitioners claim not to have a clear definition of innovation. That’s the good news. Things became less clear when we asked about other innovation initiatives like open innovation, co-creation, and crowdsourcing, where as many as 23% of innovation practitioners don’t have a clear definition of those terms (see Figure 3).

- **…but many acknowledge that their definition may differ from others within their company.** Nearly half (45%) of innovation practitioners claim to personally have a clear definition of innovation, but recognize that other employees may use a different definition.

- **A minority of innovation practitioners claim their firms employ a company-wide definition of innovation.** For all the apparent importance that companies place on innovation, only 29% of innovation practitioners state that their firms have a clear and consistent definition of innovation that applies across the organization. Firms are even less likely to have company-wide definitions for newer terms like open innovation, co-creation, and crowdsourcing; this creates an environment where misinterpretation and confusion can flourish.

- **Some teams are taking the bull by the horns.** When companies fail to create a consistent language of innovation, some teams step up and fill the gap. About one-quarter of innovation practitioners claim that their teams have developed clear definitions of “idea” and “innovation,” but again, fewer have done so for open innovation, co-creation, and crowdsourcing. Teams can become more aligned and efficient by developing their own language, but once they step outside their own internal boundaries (say, to engage with another department on an innovation initiative), those benefits disappear.

- **Individuals are empowered to identify with newer innovation terms.** Open innovation, co-creation, and crowdsourcing are understood by most innovation practitioners, as over half of them have a clear definition of the terms even if their company or teams do not. This current lack of consistency will hinder companies from understanding and embracing the opportunities these new tools offer.
Figure 3: Few firms have clear and consistent definitions for innovation-related terms

Which of the following statements best applies for each term?
(Select one.)

- I don't have a clear definition of this term.
- I personally have a clear definition of this term, but other employees may use a different definition.
- My team/department has a clear definition of this term, but other teams/departments may use a different definition.
- My company has a clear and consistent definition for this term that applies across the entire organization.

Source: IX Research Survey, 3Q 2013

Innovation Practitioners Must Practice What They Preach

There is little doubt that the term “innovation” has achieved buzzword status. At least part of the reason for that is due to a lack of consistency in its definition. How does one distinguish between an idea, an invention, and an innovation? Our survey data indicates that for many, there is no distinction: innovation practitioners report that 46% of other people they work with and 39% of leaders or managers in their company use these three terms interchangeably. What’s worse is that 23% of innovation practitioners are perpetuating this problem by using these terms interchangeably themselves, even though only a very few of them claim they don’t have a clear definition of these terms. Innovation practitioners must adopt a more disciplined...
approach in how they talk about innovation if they ever hope to create and integrate a common language of innovation into their organizations.

**Innovation Classification Systems Are Valuable Yet Uncommon**

Innovation classification systems are frameworks for categorizing the type of innovation initiatives a company is working on. Sometimes these classification systems use terms like “incremental” or “sustaining” to indicate relatively easy changes to existing products or services, and thought-provoking (yet fuzzily defined) terms like “disruptive,” “breakthrough,” “radical,” or “transformational” to indicate new products, service, markets, business models, or platforms that are take more resources to implement. Classification systems can also reflect time horizons, indicating how long it might take to develop and implement an innovation.

These classification systems allow for better communication amongst innovation teams, across departments, and with senior managers about the types of innovation initiatives that are being developed – but only if the categories are clearly defined, and if the reasons for developing those categories are fully understood by all involved employees. Our survey data shows that:

- **Few companies have a single, formal, company-wide innovation classification system.** Only 20% of the innovation practitioners we surveyed have a consistent framework for considering and categorizing their innovation initiatives. Another 25% indicate that informal classification systems exist, and 49% claim that their company has no classification system for innovation initiatives (see Figure 4). That's a problem: not all innovations are equal in terms of importance, impact, cost, and time to market. Firms without a classification system will have a hard time communicating effectively about the company's current and future innovation initiatives.

- **Of those that have some form of classification system, nearly half (45%) have three innovation categories.** Three buckets makes sense: (1) the quick and easy innovation initiatives; (2) the ones that are a bit more challenging or will take some additional time to get right; and (3) those that require substantial work and resources to implement, if they are implemented at all (see Figure 5). Thirteen percent have classification systems with just two categories. That seems rather basic, but it’s better than nothing. Another 29% have classification systems with four or more levels. Firms in this category must be careful to create clear, understandable distinctions between the levels so that employees understand and can communicate effectively about them.

- **Business or market impact is the primary basis upon which innovation classification categories are established.** Of those innovation practitioners with either formal or informal classification systems in place, 87% indicated that the impact of the innovation upon the business or market is a key basis for defining classification categories (see Figure 6). Thirty-two percent claimed that the relative importance of the innovation was a basis for establishing the classification categories. The time it takes for development (24%) and the cost to develop the innovation
(24%) were also key considerations. Thus, even when classifications are present, the basis for those classifications can be different. Companies with classification systems therefore must clearly define the categories and ensure that all employees involved in innovation understand the criteria for classifying innovation initiatives.

**Figure 4: Formal innovation classification systems are uncommon**

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**Does your company have a classification system for innovation initiatives? (Select one.)**

- **We have a single, formal, company-wide classification system for innovation initiatives**: 20%
- **We have informal categories for innovation initiatives, but there is no single company-wide classification system**: 25%
- **We don't have a classification system for innovation initiatives**: 49%
- **I don't know**: 6%

**Base: 84 innovation practitioners**

Source: IX Research Survey, Q3 2013
Figure 5: A three-category classification system is most common

How many categories do you have within your classification system for innovation initiatives? (Select one.)

- I don’t know: 13%
- Two: 13%
- Three: 45%
- Four: 21%
- Five: 3%
- Six: 5%

Base: 38 innovation practitioners whose firms have formal or informal innovation classification systems

Source: IX Research Survey, Q3 2013
Figure 6: Business impact is the primary factor when creating classification categories

Upon what does your company establish the categories for its innovation classification system? (Select all that apply.)

- The impact of the innovation upon the business or the market: 87%
- The relative importance of the innovation: 32%
- The time it will take to develop the initiative: 24%
- The cost to develop the initiative: 24%
- Other: 8%

Base: 38 innovation practitioners whose firms have formal or informal innovation classification systems

Source: IX Research Survey, Q3 2013

Poor Communication Creates Unnecessary Innovation Barriers

The importance of a common language of innovation increases as companies focus more attention and resources on innovation. Innovation is hard enough on its own. Companies don’t need to stand idly by and let unnecessary barriers fueled by poor communication undermine their innovation efforts.
Creating A Language Of Innovation Is Worth The Trouble

Some executives might question the need to develop a company-wide language of innovation, but our research shows that communications challenges are common, frequent, and involve employees throughout the organization. We found that:

- **Innovation-related communications challenges are common.** Two out of three (67%) of the innovation practitioners we surveyed report having had difficulty communicating internally about innovation within the past year. That on its face is a significant number, but it certainly understates the amount of miscommunication that is taking place across the organization – situations about which the innovation practitioner might not be aware.

- **Communication issues occur frequently, not just once in a while.** Sixteen percent of these innovation practitioners report having communication difficulty associated with innovation at least once a week (see Figure 7)! Another 45% report experiencing these challenges once a month, while 29% do so once a quarter. These communications challenges are a recurring problem, not just one-time occurrences that can be shrugged off.

- **The biggest communication gap is with senior leaders/executives.** Of that group, 63% report having had difficulty communicating about innovation with senior leaders/executives (see Figure 8). That data point alone should be sufficient enough to drive the adoption of a common language of innovation, since senior leaders play such an important role in guiding innovation and allocating resources to innovation. Communication challenges were also common between colleagues from different departments (61%) and even within the same department but on different teams (32%). Difficulty communicating with direct managers, direct reports, and team members were less common but still present.
Figure 7: Most innovation practitioners have difficulty communicating about innovation regularly

How frequently have you had difficulty communicating about innovation over the past year? (Select all that apply.)

- 16% About once in the past year
- 45% About once every six months
- 29% About once a quarter
- 7% About once a month
- 4% About once a week or more frequently
- 7% Never

Base: 56 innovation practitioners who had difficulty communicating about innovation within the past year

Source: IX Research Survey, Q3 2013
Figure 8: Innovation practitioners find it difficult to communicate with senior leaders about innovation

With which group(s) have you had difficulty communicating about innovation? (Select all that apply.)

- Senior leaders/executives: 63%
- Colleagues from different departments (HR, R&D, Marketing, etc.): 61%
- Colleagues within my department on different teams: 32%
- My direct manager: 20%
- Colleagues on my team: 18%
- My direct reports (the employees that I manage): 9%

Base: 56 innovation practitioners who had difficulty communicating about innovation within the past year

Source: IX Research Survey, Q3 2013

Communication Difficulties Result In The Unwanted Kind Of Disruption In Innovation

When they innovate, companies often strive for disruption to the markets or industries they serve. But the difficulty communicating with colleagues, managers, and executives about innovation results in a disruption of the internal innovation process – decidedly not the type of disruption anyone wants. Practitioners who report having experienced problems communicating about innovation over the past year report a variety of disruptions to the innovation process, including:

- **Wasting a market opportunity.** Fifty-five percent of these innovation practitioners report experiencing a significant delay in moving an innovation initiative...
forward, while 29% report a minor delay (see Figure 9). Delays can mean missing market opportunities, or corporate/team/individual performance goals. In fact, 39% of these innovation practitioners indicate that communication troubles led to missed goals or deadlines, which can have a domino-like effect on other parts of the business (such as manufacturing and marketing).

- **Wasting financial resources.** About one-third (32%) of these innovation practitioners claim that communication issues resulted in a waste of financial resources. The innovation process can be messy at times, and resources are sometimes devoted to efforts that ultimately were not worthwhile. But for a communication issue to result in a waste of financial resources is just plain unnecessary. Some of these innovation practitioners (27%) go so far as to indicate that communication issues have led to a loss of revenue – and that's not something the executive team would ever want to hear.

- **Wasting employees' time.** No one likes to feel that they have wasted time on a project or initiative, but 57% of these innovation practitioners report that communications problems resulted in a waste of employee time, while 68% report that these communication challenges resulted in feelings of frustration among employees. That's a serious problem for any firm trying to build a culture of innovation. Rather than being encouraged to participate in the innovation process, employees who experienced frustration during the process or felt that they wasted their time will likely be dissuaded from spending time on these kinds of initiatives in the future.
Figure 9: Communications problems negatively impact the innovation process

What issues did these communications problems associated with innovation cause over the past year? (Select all that apply.)

- A feeling of frustration: 68%
- A waste of employee time: 57%
- A significant delay in moving an innovation initiative forward: 55%
- Missed deadlines or goals: 39%
- A waste of financial resources: 32%
- A minor delay in moving an innovation initiative forward: 29%
- A loss of revenue: 27%
- Other: 5%
- None of the above: 4%

Base: 56 innovation practitioners who had difficulty communicating about innovation within the past year

Source: IX Research Survey, Q3 2013

Consistent Language Can Improve Communication About Innovation

Innovation is a challenging endeavor. It is hard enough to develop ideas that meet a market need, get buy-in from senior managers or executives, develop the product or service, and commercialize it successfully. Why make it more challenging than it needs to be?

Companies that don’t have a consistent language of innovation are doing exactly that. They end up wasting market opportunities, financial resources, and employees’ time – and all of those things contribute to a less successful innovation process, which in turn leads to diminished confidence in innovation. It’s a downward spiral.
Innovation practitioners must recognize the role that communication plays in building a larger culture of innovation, and take the necessary steps to ensure that a consistent language of innovation is implemented within the organization. Our research supports this conclusion:

- **Having a clear definition of innovation and associated terms is key to effective communication.** In total, 61% of innovation practitioners who had difficulty communicating about innovation indicated that communications would have been improved if clear definitions for innovation and related terms had either been created or if more awareness of existing definitions for those terms had been generated (see Figure 10).

- **Innovation classification systems keep everyone on the same page.** Even if “innovation” is a well-defined term, how certain innovations are categorized or classified can vary considerably – that’s where innovation classification systems can help. A majority (52%) of this group of innovation practitioners indicated that establishing an innovation classification system would have improved communication about innovation.

- **Underscoring the corporate emphasis on innovation cannot be overlooked as an important communication tool.** A set of definitions and a classification system will no doubt help curtail communication difficulties associated with innovation. At an even more basic level than that, though, is helping all employees recognize the corporate emphasis on innovation. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of these innovation practitioners indicated that their communication challenges would be improved if employees were more educated about the importance of innovation to the company’s well being.
Figure 10: Defining a language of innovation is part of building a larger culture of innovation

The Business Model Canvas: An Example Of How Clarity Breeds Usefulness

In addition to the Mission/Vision/Values example, another illustration of how common language can lead to efficient communication and outcome is the business model canvas (BMC), a tool developed by Alexander Osterwalder and Yves Pigneur. The BMC is a simple framework for either constructing new business models or deconstructing—and learning from—existing business models (see Figure 11).
You can deconstruct the business model of most every business, from Google all the way down to the local coffee shop, by using the basic building blocks of the BMC.\textsuperscript{9} This is possible because the canvas uses clearly defined terms, which allow all BMC users regardless of department or educational background to speak the same language.\textsuperscript{10}

It is important to note that Osterwalder and Pigneur didn’t just decide for themselves what terms to use and what those definitions would be. As part of the development process, the two researchers created an online community to help develop and vet the building blocks, thus harnessing the power of the crowd to identify terms and definitions that were easily understood.\textsuperscript{11} This approach works: once the BMC language has been introduced, even people with no prior knowledge of the BMC are able to produce their own canvas within a matter of minutes.\textsuperscript{12} This tool can then be shared with others quickly and easily because of the common language being used.

Innovation practitioners that adopt the same inclusive approach will benefit by choosing the right terms, the right definitions, and the right classification system to improve the way employees communicate about innovation.
**Recommendations: Improve Efficiency By Creating A Common Language of Innovation**

The case has been made that (a) few firms have adopted a common language of innovation; (b) innovation practitioners regularly experience communication difficulties when addressing innovation; (c) communications difficulties have a strong negative impact the innovation process; and (d) a common language of innovation can help eliminate these communication issues and thus improve innovation efficiency. Accordingly, innovation practitioners seeking to eliminate unnecessary barriers to successful innovation should take the following steps:

- **Identify the innovation terms that are relevant to your business.** Examine what terms are understood and misunderstood across innovation teams and individual practitioners who deal with innovation on a regular basis. Consider other terms that might not be used frequently today but which may be likely to be used in the future (such as open innovation). Include any terms that might be used in new or existing innovation classification systems. Keep the taxonomy as concise and relevant as possible by setting aside terms that are unlikely to be needed or used going forward. Use the IX Research Language Of Innovation Development Worksheet to help get you started, or use it as a guide for developing your own tool to distribute internally (see Appendix A).

- **Create definitions that fit your business.** The only definition of innovation that truly matters is *yours*. There are countless business books, websites, consultants, vendors, professors, and experts who believe their definition of “innovation” (and related terms) is the only one that matters. That just isn’t true. Just like a corporate mission statement, a company can have its own definition of innovation so long as (a) it fits the company’s innovation strategy and tactics; and (b) it is applied consistently across the organization. The same goes for other innovation-related terms like invention, idea, co-creation, crowdsourcing, open innovation, etc. That is not to say that generally accepted concepts of what these terms mean should be ignored when developing your own definitions. Consistency with the outside world can be helpful, particularly when more specific yet commonly misunderstood terms (like co-creation and crowdsourcing) are being defined. But what matters most is to build and support a language of innovation that works for your firm. Be inclusive (but not overly so) when building the group to tackle these issues. By doing so, you will (a) ensure that all angles are being considered; and (b) improve adoption of the language across the organization.

- **Develop a classification system based on the definitions you’ve adopted.** Not all innovations are created equal. Classification systems are important tools to allow for proper innovation pipeline development and management, and for communicating about the innovation process between and amongst employees. Formal classification systems are uncommon yet not particularly difficult to establish. Regardless of the system you choose to implement, the most important thing is to clearly define the different categories so that all employees are on the same page.
• **Involve Human Resources in the process of developing and socializing your innovation language.** Innovation leaders, teams, and/or practitioners may be best suited to defining the terms in your innovation taxonomy, but who will help socialize those terms across the organization? Human resources (HR) professionals are ideally suited to help, and should be included in the process. HR pros have experience developing company-wide policies and communicating those policies to the organization. Leverage the expertise, tactics, and existing communications tools used by HR to create, validate, and socialize your innovation language to your fellow employees.

• **Share your innovation language with partners.** If your company works on innovation with partner organizations today, share your innovation language with them in order to eliminate disruptions. If you are just starting out developing your set of definitions, consider including partner organizations in the development process. Not only will that create commonality, but it may also make the process more efficient (i.e., avoiding the “blank canvas” syndrome). Remember though that the point of the exercise is to create a set of definitions that apply best to your firm first and foremost.

• **Revisit your innovation language each year to ensure consistency and coverage.** Mission, vision, and values statements are unlikely to go in and out of favor very often, but terms in your innovation language might. Innovation leaders should conduct an annual review of these terms to adjust definitions or add new terms that have emerged that are aligned with the company’s innovation goals.
ENDNOTES

1 The total percentage (83%) represents the rounded sum of the un-rounded percentages of those innovation practitioners whose firms have a clearly defined mission statement and who know what it is (74%), plus those innovation practitioners whose firms have a clearly defined mission statement but who don’t know what it is (10%).

2 IX Research Survey, Q3 2013.

3 A note on the buzz-worthiness of the term “innovation:” On the first night of televised coverage of the 2014 Winter Olympics, NBC color commentator Scott Hamilton continuously used the word “innovative” to describe the skating routine of a young Japanese man. But was it truly innovative? This athlete did not create and perform a new jump, or use a different type of skate to achieve a desired outcome. He may well have developed a more creative approach to performing the same actions that others before him have done hundreds of times, but is that correctly characterized as being innovative? The point here is not to debate whether the ice skating routine is or it isn’t innovative, but to demonstrate how the term innovation has become so prominent in our lexicon that it is now associated with anything that is new or different, to the point that its importance, relevance, and understanding within business has been undermined.

4 IX Research Survey, Q3 2013.

5 IX Research Survey, Q3 2013.


7 “Significant delay” and “minor delay” were not specifically defined within the survey.

8 See http://www.businessmodelgeneration.com/.

9 Some industries do require a bit of tweaking to the canvas. For example, the businesses operating within the US healthcare industry face certain obstacles that don’t apply to most other companies. In fact, Innovation Excellence was involved in a yearlong project called modelH where we, with the help of a strong community of healthcare professionals and innovators, co-created a business model canvas that applied specifically to healthcare. You can learn more about that project here: http://bit.ly/PoCCiHIsde.

10 It is important to note that Osterwalder and Pigneur didn’t just decide for themselves what terms to use and what those definitions would be. As part of the development process, the two researchers created an online community to help develop and vet the building blocks, thus harnessing the power of the crowd to identify terms and definitions that were easily understood.


12 I witnessed this phenomenon myself, having been present for Alexander Osterwalder’s keynote at the Front End of Innovation conference in Boston in May 2013. After his introductory breakdown of the language, all 500 people in the audience were given 5 minutes to map out their own firm’s business model using a printed copy of the BMC and a bunch of sticky notes. While these versions may not have been perfect, the proved point was that simple tools with clear language are easily understood and utilized.
## Appendix 1: Language Of Innovation Development Worksheet

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