ROUNDTABLE REPORT

THECR NETWORK

Leadership, Mindsets and Culture: A Conversation with Anita Zielina

📷 SNAPSHOT

SPEAKERS
Anita Zielina (Craig Newmark J-School at CUNY) & Kelly Schott (TheCR)

COMPETENCIES
Leadership, Culture

MATURITY PHASES
CMM1, CMM2, CMM3

HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Ever wondered why innovation is so messy?** Anita shared her take on why this is usually the case within organizations.
2. **Looking for the keys to success for a successful innovation and transfer process?** Anita shared her top 3 essentials.
3. **Want to affect culture change?** This type of team is imperative, as is buy-in from upper management.

OVERVIEW

➢ **Background Anita Zielina.** Anita is the Director of News Innovation and Leadership at the Craig Newmark J-School at CUNY.
- Anita lives in New York, but is originally from Vienna, Austria. Her role is to build and run executive education for media professionals. Community and audience work is a big part of this role.
- Her past roles have included Chief Innovation Officer, Chief Digital Officer and Chief Product Officer. The experience gained in these roles has fueled her innovation expertise.
- Every organization is currently in some kind of transition. The topics of changing culture, developing culture and thinking about how to make their organizations more agile and more innovative are core to an employee's daily roles.

THECR NETWORK

Leadership, Mindsets and Culture: A Conversation with Anita Zielina

- **Why is innovation messy?** It's because human beings are involved. Human beings are messy and their minds don't work like a given framework or structure, i.e. the theoretical basis behind innovation. Human beings are filled with fear in terms of how their jobs might change or insecurities about how they can create and add value to the transformation process. Managers are also human beings and they are flawed in how they may communicate the new strategy. They are flawed in terms of how to integrate feedback from employees into the transformation process.

➢ **Culture as an essential part of successful innovation and transformation processes.** There is not a blueprint that can be followed, especially given the complexities and differences of a cross section of industries. However, there are some facets that are part of successful innovation and transformation change processes. All of them have to do with culture.
    - *Collaboration.* The way that leadership is perceived and the way that leadership works is changing and must change dramatically. We are coming from a world that practices top-down hierarchy leadership. There may still be a place for that style of leadership is some organizations, but in many organizations that are in a change period, it turns out that a collaborative, more coaching and more integrative style that builds on the skills and knowledge of employees has been more successful than the traditional hierarchical leadership. It's impossible for one person to have all the knowledge and skills necessary. Therefore, collaboration is the key.
    - *Communication.* If you look at successful and not so successful transformation processes, one thing that comes up again and again as a differentiating factor is that organizations that prioritize internal communication and external communication – but mostly internal communication – have a better chance of success when reinventing themselves.
        ○ Most organizations think that they are good at communicating. However, the opposite is usually true. The reason is that oftentimes when you have worked so hard thinking about something, it becomes so clear in your head that you *think* you have communicated properly. Anita recommends repeating something extensively in order to help move the communication process forward.

THECR NETWORK

Leadership, Mindsets and Culture:
A Conversation with Anita Zielina

- *Moving towards a culture of innovation, change, experimentation and failure.* The idea of product perfection before launching to consumers causes a great deal of pressure and tension for success. This prevents the organization and individuals from experimenting. However, changing the corporate mindset to one of constant iteration and experimentation is far more successful. Working towards user-centered processes in the beginning of the innovation process – which involves actually showing your prototype to your users/customers early on in order to profit from their feedback – is actually something that will help you improve your relationship with clients (they feel valued) and it will help improve the culture of innovation within the organization. It shows employees that you want them to be part of the innovation process. Failure and experimentation is an essential part of the innovation process. You can't innovate without failure.

➢ **Collaboration and inter-disciplinary teams.** Digitalization has disrupted workflows and value creation in organizations. It is very difficult to find solutions when there is tunnel vision within the various roles of an organization. To build products and services that fulfil a user's needs requires a diversity of skills to bring a product to market. Bringing all the different roles and expertise within the organization together in one room and aligning them around a joint motive is highly effective. However, this is a huge culture shift as many organizations still work in silos.

➢ **Cross-functional teams.** Human beings enjoy being with other human beings and having fun at work. At some point in time, people become unchallenged by their jobs. Anita has found it helpful to create collaborative spaces. However, start small because it will be overwhelming and scary to people initially. Give people the freedom and reward them with the trust that allows them to create these hubs of collaboration. Starting with a small group who are willing to collaborate is imperative.

➢ **Use cross-functional teams to affect culture change within an organization.** Once people take the time to think about how they do things, it's difficult to stop them. It is like a rolling motion that makes them question current practices. This helps to impact other parts of the organization. When other parts of the organization see these groups collaborating – and having fun – they will want to get involved, too. Not everyone will see it that way, so just focus on the ones who are interested. Eventually, it will be leadership's responsibility to make clear that this is not only an allowed behavior – the ability to collaborative – but it is also something that is supported by the organization and rewarded.

THECR
NETWORK

Leadership, Mindsets and Culture: A Conversation with Anita Zielina

LESSONS LEARNED

- ➢ Rachel agreed with Anita that once you can provide that supportive environment for collaboration, people become very engaged. However, in Rachel's experience it's the executive leadership that gets in the way. Usually it's because they have discrete KPIs that don't reward collaboration. Anita agreed and offered the following solutions:
  - Leadership should analyze what they want to do from the top down. Consider OPRs – Objectives and Key Results. OPRs are a way for the organization to align different entities in the organization around a set of shared KPIs and metrics. It is difficult to be aligned without having the same set of goals.
    - ○ It doesn't have to be difficult. The main idea is to align the organization around a common goal.
    - ○ Everyone has worked in organizations where they don't have shared KPIs. Oftentimes, they are, in fact, competing with each other within the same organization! It's not a recipe for success.
  - Start with a nucleus of people in your own department or organization who have a willingness to create a shared understanding. Once you have a middle group that is aligned around common goals and values – a culture change nucleus – then start to identify some people who are peers in other parts of the organization who can work with you as allies. Eventually, this collaborative work style will rise up through the ranks of different management levels. These different management levels will see that there is an internal movement that could affect change if properly supported.

THECR
NETWORK

Leadership, Mindsets and Culture:
A Conversation with Anita Zielina

➢ Members discussed different ways that they've gone about sharing and encouraging other members of their organization to join these inter-disciplinary teams.

- Rachel began by sharing her experience with some of the advisory work of TheCR. She has seen a tipping point. Someone in the organization has been affecting small changes and then all of a sudden others notice and want to be a part of the movement. In TheCR's research, approximately 27% of community teams acted like Centers of Excellence, but only 8% were actually tasked with that role. They are building the community and trying to integrate cross-functionally to help align everyone. Not surprising, they are under-resourced to do both.

- Anita has also seen this in her work. People may be working on something like digitalization in a small, collaborative group without the notice of anyone in the organization. Then all of a sudden as people start to take notice or there are some small successes, the group becomes overwhelmed because they are still a small team. This happens in all organizations that experience culture change. It's usually caused by some sort of trigger. Usually there are about 10-15% of people who are change makers, about 10-15% who are anti-change and then a broad mass in-between. These are the people who tip the scales – the people in-between. Once this group starts to follow the lead of the change makers, it has a network affect that sees others jumping on the band wagon. It's an exhausting time, but a good sign when that starts.

THECR
NETWORK

Leadership, Mindsets and Culture: A Conversation with Anita Zielina

> ➤ Rachel explained that everyone on the call has a community of people who are engaged with each other. It's more than a sub-network, but it's not the power network in their organization. It's not the traditional executives or the traditional power brokers. What Rachel sees is that during that shift, the structural leaders start to understand the power of influence – the leader's influence vs. structural authority. One of the discussion points at TheCR's recent conference was that if you don't own your leadership at that point, you miss a huge opportunity. You have more power than you think you have and/or are formally given. You can start to push back on leaders because you've engaged a group of people. That demonstrates power for many people.
>
>   - Anita added that one of the secrets of successful transformation is that when management formally announces re-structuring or a new way of doing things, it's usually already common knowledge in the organization. The bad transformations are when there is a complete misalignment between where management thinks the organization is, but it vastly differs from the employee's view. If you have a grassroots movement of the organization already collaborating and thinking in a different way, then at some point management will want to formalize it, i.e. to form a community team with members from all parts of the organization or an interdisciplinary product team. Ideally, it's just putting an official stamp on something that has already grown over the years. The power of this is that it is owned by the employees and it won't feel like a strange thing forced on them by management. It's something that they want to do, which makes it far more successful.

THECR NETWORK

Leadership, Mindsets and Culture: A Conversation with Anita Zielina

➤ There is only so much that can be done at the grassroots level to affect strategy. Strategy requires buy-in from someone on the management team. If you don't have upper level supporting the change, Anita suggests that it may be time to leave the organization. You need allies in powerful positions.

- Make the connections and foster relationships way before you need them. As an observation, Anita stated that women – generally – are not as good at prioritizing the building of their networks. They don't always see it as part of their job. Networking is work and it is part of any job. If you don't tap into the power networks in the organization to build relationships and gain allies in strong positions, they won't be there when you need them. You need to build that months before you need it.
- Anita recommends that everyone spend time meeting people, asking them about the organization and learning about the culture. Literally have lunch or coffee with someone new every day. The make-or-break point of success is your ability to connect with people and understand the real culture of the organization, not just how it works on paper. Who are the people in power? What are the unwritten rules that need to be followed? Who are the people that you have to get to know to get things done and approved? Anita highly suggests that members take the time to prioritize this practice. Rachel agreed. Everyone has to figure out how to make networking a priority, which could mean saying no to other job priorities.

➤ Anita shared that many of the companies that she has worked for in the past were very traditional, well-established companies with firmly entrenched cultures. To affect change in these well-established firms, Anita recommends finding the balance between appreciating tradition and driving change. Especially when it's a legacy organization. Give them time to take it step by step. There is a temptation to move quickly when it comes to innovation, but people in legacy organizations are not used to that kind of rapid change and they will push back. To move too fast could risk losing people, even if they were initially on board for the transformation. Pace yourself and identify one or two things to accomplish in a year, prioritize them and consciously park all the other ideas.

- People who have been with an organization a long time have an emotional attachment to it. Spend time in the beginning to listen to people. Invest time trying to understand how these people think and what they like about the organization and what they would change about the organization.