

Protostar: Renowned for Supporting Innovation

Protostar Leadership Development supports managers from many leading organisations, utilising management consultants with at least 20 years senior management experience at global corporations. Recently, we caught up with Michael Coates, Managing Director, to find out more about the firm and how it helps organisations to be more innovative.

No stranger to innovation awards, (Protostar were also an AI award winner last year) Michael clearly has a passion for innovation and sharing it with the clients his consultancy supports. Simply having a conversation with Michael allows you to learn so much about innovation, so it's no surprise to hear that he is a visiting university professor, teaching innovation and change. What is more of a surprise about this British Managing Director, is that he teaches in Mexico – that's a long commute.

"It all started due to family connections to Mexico, however, I soon found that there is a very strong entrepreneurial spirit and innovative work ethic in the young people of Mexico, so it is a great pleasure to help nurture that."

Back in the UK, Michael and his Protostar team support organisations ranging from small charities to global corporations. Regardless of company size, Protostar's innovation consultants tend to follow a similar approach. "First, we help the client to understand what innovation is and what it is not. Then we move on to clarify at a high level what it would involve to develop a culture of innovation at their organisation – this is mainly so they realise that it will take effort, and they have to be committed to the journey."

Once the client agrees that they want to be more innovative, Michael and his team survey the employees looking for evidence of the organisation having:

- The resources to support innovation
- People with the right skills
- Processes that support innovation
- Enough funds
- A suitable culture

And lastly, that managers demonstrate the behaviours needed in an innovative organisation.

Michael goes on to explain where this idea came from and what they do with the results. "This survey is based on work from MIT, and it is also a great tool for starting a discussion with the organisation's leaders about changes that will have to be made if innovation is to thrive."

Not all companies are willing or able to make the changes – even those with a desire to be more innovative. Michael often finds that leaders find comfort in just doing what they have always done. "That is where our innovation coaches come in. We need to help the leaders let go of past ways of working, make some difficult decisions, and to embrace the fear."



Michael Coates Visiting Professor ITESM Mexico



So, what next after the survey results are discussed? Michael is keen to explain that this is where the excitement truly begins. "We run a series of workshops with any employee that is considered key to the organisation being more innovative. Partly, this is to teach a series of easy to learn innovation techniques, but also to have them make decisions that will impact the organisation, such as agreeing a process for gathering and filtering innovation ideas. We find the workshop approach speeds up the change process and allows for participants to come away feeling that not only did they learn something, but that they made decisions."

To prove the point about innovation techniques being easy-to-learn, Michael demonstrates how to look at everyday products and services

"It all started due to family connections to Mexico, however, I soon found that there is a very strong entrepreneurial spirit and innovative work ethic in the young people of Mexico, so it is a great pleasure to help nurture that."

with a view to seeking possible innovation. It is fascinating to listen as he points to everyday objects and names familiar processes that we all use and helps you to look at them differently. This leads me to ask Michael about 'Disruptive Innovation' – is that not the key to a company's success? "Possibly," says Michael. "Disruptive Innovation is commonly misunderstood, with many thinking you simply do things in a radically different way and that's an innovation. Instead, companies should consider whether their sector has tended to work in the same way for a long time – such as the taxi industry, which was disrupted by Uber – or if there is a segment of their customer base that tends to get forgotten. By offering something unique to that small segment and getting a name for yourself, it allows you to start offering that new approach to more mainstream and, typically, more profitable segments. This leaves the established providers wondering where on earth you came from. Not all companies exist in that situation, so disruptive innovation is not for all."

This message sometimes comes as a disappointment to clients, who were excited by the prospect of being the disrupters, and, again, that's where Protostar's innovation coaches kick in, helping the leaders to follow a more appropriate path. Protostar's team of consultants and coaches all have many years of business and leadership experience, a deliberate decision by Michael. "Many consultancies hire raw graduates, and while I am also a university professor, so I support graduate hiring, when it comes to helping a whole organisation to become more innovative, the leaders need an experienced and steady hand to help them achieve that."

As winners of the 2019 Best Innovation Support Consultancy, Protostar's Managing Director Michael seems quite upbeat about the future, despite the uncertainties that Brexit brings. "Brexit, while not something I wanted, is going to drive change and change can drive innovation if it is properly supported. If an organisation wants that innovation support, Protostar will be there for them."

As for the future in general, Michael is also optimistic and excited. "When I was a boy, I had a book that explained what the future would look like. By the year 2000, all pavements would move you along on a conveyor and there would be a base on the moon. While I am disappointed that didn't happen, the book never imagined innovations such as smartphones, the gig economy or me having a YouTube channel. The precise nature of future innovation is difficult to predict, but rest assured that there will be many new innovations and, unlike invention, which often needs technical skills, anyone can be taught how to innovate. So, we all have an opportunity to get our names in the history books."

Michael started to explain the difference between "invention" and "innovation", but we are out of time. A topic of a future AI article maybe.