Fostering an intrapreneurial culture

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Hello, and welcome to the second part of a four-part series on intrapreneurialism – that's intrapreneurialism, not entrepreneurialism. It's about people who drive the same aspects of entrepreneurialism, innovation and change, but from inside of businesses. Today we're going to be talking about the culture for intrapreneurialism. How do you build an environment that allows people to explore and push innovation within your business? My name is Josh Valman. I am the CEO of RPDK, and for pretty much all my life, I've been running small engineering businesses, businesses that develop new products and particularly work with businesses big and small to make change and innovation actually happen. I spent a long time in my life banging my head against processes, banging my head against businesses that are desperate to change but just can't work out how. In this series, we're looking to experts and those with experience to understand more about what is an intrapreneur and how can they really have an effect on a business? In our first series we talked about the details of what an intrapreneur is and the effects they can have. Today I'm joined by three guests to talk about how to build that environment. I'm joined today by Duncan Levesley, who is the Director of Grant Thornton. I'm joined by Maria Chenoweth. She's the Chief Executive at Traid. And I'm joined by Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio and Services at HUT 3. Thank you all for joining me

today. Perhaps, Duncan, I can start with you. Could you take a couple of minutes to introduce yourself and your business?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

Yes. Hi, Josh. Great to be here today. So I am a Director at Grant Thornton. I have been working with dynamic, growing businesses for most of my career, helping companies of all sorts of shapes and sizes and sectors to grow. I currently run a range of business growth services for government. We act on behalf of government organisations, from the Department for Business and Trade to the Welsh Government, helping companies to grow in the UK and overseas. We work right across the piece in terms of strategy, sales, operations, finance, people-related issues to help companies look at the range of different opportunities for them and the critical issues that are relevant for their individual business to help them to grow. Grant Thornton, where I work, we're a large, global professional services network, and we have about 6,000 people in the UK, about 70,000 people in the network globally across about 140 different countries. It's quite a wide-ranging team that work with businesses day in, day out to help them to grow and build their businesses.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

That's a lot of people to build a culture around. Brilliant. Thanks, Duncan. And Maria, maybe you can introduce your business as well.

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

I've got two at the moment. My primary job, I'm the CEO of the charity Traid. There was a lot of intrapreneurship that I delivered myself within the organisation. Traid is a charity, and we are the only charity which is all about clothing, clothing waste, how our clothes are made, getting people to wear secondhand over new. It's quite London-centric. I've got 12 shops, a huge warehouse in Alperton. And then I fund global projects, organic cotton farming in Ethiopia, Benin, children's centres in Bangladesh. We're very London-centric, but we have huge global impacts. I've got 170 staff. It's a circular business model, a green business model. And then the other job that I have is I'm Co-Founder of a business called Charity Super.Mkt, which is two years old, with Wayne Hemingway, and that's all about getting charities into the spaces and places that they wouldn't otherwise be able to operate in. So the pinnacle of that was having a site in Bond Street. Highlighting how good charity retail is and taking it to other new ventures. So that's what I've got at this moment.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

And, Maria, you're also an MBA graduate and an honorary doctor at The Open University. Tell me about that. What does that involve?

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

So I give The Open University access to filming, I give lectures, I've contributed to modules on marketing. I was a critical reader during lockdown. That was delivering a new module all about the green economy for the MBA. So anything that The Open University ask me to do I will happily oblige, because I am a super, super, super fan.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Thank you, Maria. And finally, last but not least, Darryl, can you give us a couple of minutes on yourself and your business?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

Sure, absolutely. I head up artificial intelligence strategy and development at HUT 3, which is our marketing agency. Our real focus is about delivering remarkable marketing for our customers. So the reason we started investing in artificial intelligence was really to make sure that we were staying at the cutting edge of innovation, making sure that we could deliver personalised marketing for our clients in a way that they weren't being able to do before. The business has always been built around data and strategy, making sure that we're pushing the boundaries of what's achievable through marketing. So that's really where I came in. I've been with the organisation for about a year now, but my background's been in technology. I've done 15 years in different technology organisations and have watched the growth of new technologies coming to

market and how those have impacted. At this current point in my career it's really riding that new wave of innovation that's happening in the AI space, which has been super exciting. Loads of different things coming to market every single day, so keeping up and making sure that we understand what's coming, what's new and where we need to be investing our time in researching and developing.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

You must spend your life picking through media, trying to work out what's real and what's not in this AI storm at the moment, aren't you?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

Very much so, I think. Every day there's a new model, a new application that we need to start understanding. Our customers will always be, especially in the tech space, they're coming to us with ideas and questions around new technologies, so we're constantly having to see what's coming to market, what's new and how that's going to affect the way that we're doing our business.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Fantastic. Thank you. So, Duncan, let me start my first question with you. I mean, you're working with big government organisations, entities – I don't know how you want to frame them – and, whilst they're also trying to deliver change, they probably can benefit from some input from intrapreneurs, let's say. So how

important is innovation and intrapreneurism in particular to those government organisations and the businesses they work with?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

I work on behalf of a number of government departments and devolved government, local government to help companies to grow for a range of reasons. But mostly it's around the value that growth adds to the economy. And government, all shapes and sizes, is generally really keen to see that happen across a range of different use cases, whether that's driving exports, whether it's around innovation and whether it's around particular sectors, and we really see that impetus to help the local economy to grow. I think it's really important for the local businesses that they support to do this as well. You know, if we're not growing, we're typically shrinking, and for companies to develop, to be able to achieve their objectives, for their people to achieve their objectives, they generally need to look at how to innovate to do that. And we support them right across the piece, looking at what that means for their business in terms of maybe introducing new products, maybe new services, maybe new processes to facilitate that sort of change, that sort of growth, to help them to continue their place in the market and to grow that further.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Okay. Well, I think, I mean, I've spent a lot of time with businesses that are heavily regulated. When anyone says the word government, first thing most people

think is not the word innovation; they think regulation, policy, process. How does that affect driving change and innovation? Is it as bad as people might think working in that kind of environment, or is actually that there is an opportunity for innovation and there is a culture for change and pushback?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

I think there's a real culture for chage and innovation, and I think there's a lot of focus on helping companies to develop and to change. The sort of support available is really quite significant. I think a lot of businesses don't understand quite what's available from the government to help them to grow . The support from, for example, Department for Business & Trade to help those that are exporting to maybe change the business models, maybe innovate to how they can service new markets. And there's lots of support around direct or indirect innovation in the UK from people at Innovate UK as well. I think because some of the schemes are quite specific to particular businesses, particular sectors, particular regions, not everyone always understands what they're eligible for, but I'd really recommend anyone that's listening to this conversation today to have a careful look at what their individual businesses might be eligible for in terms of government support to help them innovate, to help them to change.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

It's an interesting challenge, particularly when we talk about AI, which is this year's – and a part of last year's – but it's definitely going to be this year's buzzword for innovation and change. And I think we're seeing people rushing to deliver AI as wide and far as they can, and I'm sure you'll probably be seeing that at a government level as well, to try and identify what is AI for and what does that mean. And with that sort of constant cycle of change that people are trying to deliver – at one point it was 3D printing, at the moment it's AI, I'm sure it'll be something else by next year. How do you see large organisations like the government deal with that, would you call it pressure? – from people to bring in what is currently new and exciting? And how do they handle that kind of change and the requirements to implement it as quick as possible?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

I think the simple answer is if you're government, if you're a large corporate or if you're an SME, then the impact of new technology like AI is going to be very specific to what you're trying to do and what you're trying to achieve, and looking at it very carefully on a case-by-case basis is key. Every government department that's looking at technology to develop processes, ways of working, is going to find different use cases for it depending on exactly what they're doing and what technologies are available for them. Obviously their appetite for risk, appetite for change, as well. So it's really important, whether it's a government department or whether it's a business, to look at what's right for

that individual organisation. We see this on the business support programmes that we run. It will be very much focused on identifying the critical areas for each company that we're supporting on behalf of the government as to where they're going to get the most value. So when we work on AI, for example, in some of our programmes, we're not suggesting that every company can do the same thing. We're looking at the layers of different forms of technology in this space and different processes, services, products that that individual business might have and how AI might touch it to improve it.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

And I think that's the critical part of this intrapreneur rule, this person within a business who's trying to instil and instigate change is trying to find the right application. It's impossible to go into a business and say, right, here's technology, use it. It has to be solution and purpose-driven. Darryl, I'm sure you probably banged your head against that several times in your area of work. Looking at AI being the thing that everybody wants but nobody quite knows what to do with in a lot of cases. Do you want to talk a bit about that? What's your experience of businesses that might be desperate to implement technology but haven't yet found a focus for it?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

I think probably the most important thing for us was developing a framework for how we assess new tools and new applications. So there were five pillars that

very quickly came to the forefront that we considered to be the most important to make a decision when it came to selecting to even invest in a new opportunity or to spend time on developing something. I think the speed that we're currently moving at, and the rate of new technology that's coming to market, it's probably impossible to be continuously on the cutting edge. I think that anyone that actually is trying to do that will probably burn out quite quickly. So what we try to do is have a quick assessment up front to understand when a new technology comes to market, is it a monumental shift in the direction that's going further than what we're already able to achieve? And if we assess that up front, what we then need to look at is how quickly can we build that into a development phase and what is the likelihood of something else coming along to replace it before we've even got to that point. I think a lot of the time that's looking at the market leaders in those applications. If something new comes to market, do we believe that a market leader will come up with a replacement for that within the next couple of weeks? In which case, let's not focus on that new, groundbreaking technology, let's see if we can get something more stable and probably more focused around governance. And I think that's probably…

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Building a lot of technology in-house is not just about implementing technology that exists, it's actually building it from the ground up.

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

Yes, I think in terms of artificial intelligence, you've got different layers of where you can get involved. From our perspective, it's around app development, actually making applications specific to marketing and to our clients' requirements. There's the ground that you can play in, in terms of actually building large-language models, but that's an expensive billion-dollar game, and we're seeing that playing off against the US and China right now. So there's not necessarily a remit that many businesses will ever try and get involved in, but utilising these technology models, and allowing those to become hopefully a value-add to your business or your operation, is really where we're sitting and playing.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Okay, so your team must be quite interesting. You must have a whole load of people who are all vying to bring forward ideas and push new technology forward. What does that team look like? How big is it? What kind of personalities have you got?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

I think the business of HUT 3 was set up around remote work, which has always allowed us to bring in the best and hopefully the brightest minds, not necessarily being geolocated. So that helps. First of all, we've got people that were excited about this technology up front. In terms of the actual silos, we have

a real split. Those that are customer facing, they're right at the coal front. They're hearing what customers are requiring. Maybe the problems that they're coming up against, and their job is to bring those problems to us so that internally, our internal development team, can see where there's opportunities to hopefully innovate on that problem, maybe find solutions or maybe accelerate the process that already sits in place. So there's this two-pronged approach, and that's really where AI is being brought into it. Traditionally, it has always been the same, just without artificial intelligence. We were looking at maybe more data plays, or we were looking at more creative or design processes. So it's just building on the innovation that was already there.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

So you've got a team that have all got a lot of touch points with quite interesting areas of technology, but also client requirements. So you must have lots of people vying for, this is the right answer, or this is what we should do, and this is what we should do next, and here I've built this, why don't you have a look at this? How do you maintain that culture that allows people to contribute but keep the focus on what we're trying to do here, which is deliver change but also make some money in the middle?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

That's a really good question. I think probably it goes back to that framework again. We need to, when we put that framework in place, an underpinning

part of that was building out a roadmap. Now that roadmap needed to be fairly rigid in the fact of, if we constantly are moving the goalposts or focusing on new objectives, then we'll never get anything done essentially. There's just not enough people, not enough time, not enough scale. So building that roadmap was incredibly important. We knew where we wanted to go, but making sure there was just enough flexibility and agility within that roadmap, so if something new and groundbreaking comes across or a customer requirement that can scale outside of one individual client comes across, then we can maybe look to shift focus. But I think it's important to have a framework, have a roadmap and try to stick to it where you can.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

So you're sort of in a world where you're surrounded by intrapreneurs, whereas some of the other people we've spoken to, it's 1 in 1,000 people that are ready to make a change and push forwards, and you've almost got the opposite problem. Instead of trying to foster that culture of contribution and innovation, you're trying to control it and make sure you've got a focused approach from all those minds working together.

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

I think so. I think it's been refreshing joining HUT 3 because it's a different approach to innovation. But previous to that I worked in large enterprise-level tech companies, and you're looking at much more hierarchy layers, internal

politics and all of those sorts of things that come with it. So the frustration there was always focused around just trying to get sign-off, and that often meant that we couldn't even get proof of concept in place until sign-off was delivered, and at that point, either the technology had moved on. Or we actually realised that we were investing in the wrong thing and there was something better out there, because we hadn't had the opportunity to actually dive into testing it and trialling it and experimenting with it. So I think that's what's been quite nice about joining this organisation is their different approach to it. It's kind of test it, trial it, be accepting or accept failure. Because I think that's also a really key point in this. I think any intrapreneurialship requires you to be comfortable with failure, because you're going to come up against a lot of things, you're going to fail. That's how you learn. That's it. So, yes, failure has been an important part of our process.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Have you, I'm quite interested in people that have made that jump from a very corporate environment to a very start-up or flexible environment. Have you ever sat looking out to sea and thought about, looking back, knowing what I know now, this is what I would have liked to have seen happen differently in those larger corporate entities, to really foster yourself and probably some other people that really wanted to contribute but just kept banging their head?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

That's a good question. I think most large organisations still want to be innovating, and they still want to be pushing ahead. A lot of the time it just comes down to, usually legacy requirements, that aren't necessarily up to date with the changing landscape and what's in place. So I guess it's probably just reviewing those requirements is probably the most important thing. And having an organisation that's open to feedback at all levels, in certainly the organisations I've worked in, their senior leadership was always open to conversation, it just necessarily would take longer to be able to get that conversation up to the table. So I think it's just important from a perspective of moving forwards fast, being able to have internal feedback and hopefully get discussions levelled quicker.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Okay. I think there's a lot of people that'll be watching this and thinking, that's quite funny, because you're talking about this large corporate that's slow to move, trips over itself, and anyone would think you're talking about a 50-year-old conglomerate. You're not. You're talking about a modern, large-tech business. These companies haven't been around for longer than 20, 30 years and are considered cutting edge, and yet we're talking about them as if they're dinosaurs. Maria, how does that make you feel working in an industry that's significantly older? The apparel industry is surely full of, what would you call it? Sort of archaic ways of doing things, hasn't yet caught up with the times, probably lacks technology in a lot of places. Certainly a lot of the

clothing industry I've worked in does. How does how does that make you feel hearing that even what we consider to be new-technology businesses are struggling with with building this culture for change?

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

Well, I work in the charity sector, so that's even more backwards.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Charity plus apparel, it's compounded at this point.

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

So, I mean, for Traid we're just using technologies, we're beginning to use it to do people's jobs and to get people processed quicker for the payroll, manage sickness. I've got two staff members, senior managers, who just love tech and love new, new things, where you know, for myself no. So I have to let other people around me take that on and dominate me, as you know, even trying to blur my background causes a bit of a hassle.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

So I mean, I've worked with quite a few charities over the years, and what I really love about working with charities is everyone you talk to is excited and aligned on the cause of what we're trying to do. You don't work for a charity unless you really believe in what they do. But that must also mean that you're, I guess it's still an entrepreneurial thing, you've got people who desperately want to see the cause happen, they've probably got many ideas about how to make it happen, and what could be better. Are you also finding yourself trying to manage lots of people who want to contribute, and you've got to split the difference between contributing and making changes to the business and doing the thing they need to do day to day to make the whole business work?

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

Well, at Traid that's not how we operate. Everybody is into fashion, everybody is processing clothes and everybody loves clothing. The international work we do is incredible, but it's not at the fore. But, it's exactly what you're saying, so when I work with hospices and other people, that work is at the fore, before the charity retail. So board members have to make a decision of should we invest in extra staff and more shops to generate more income? But really, what we have to be investing in is more nurses for hospice care. So when I work in Charity Super.Mkt and I see people work for Cancer Research and all these amazing charities, the people are so on board, so on board and incredible. But for Traid, we're all about retail, fashion, London and very business orientated.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Okay. So how do you handle that culture then? How do you create an environment that makes sure that it's not just down to you to work out what's new, what's next and making sure you're keeping up with everything that needs to happen? How do you get everybody to contribute?

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

Well, I think I probably give a lot of that because I've been in my industry for 35 years. I've been at Traid for 26 years. That my whole brain is wired to see what problems are coming and what resources are out there to resolve them. So even though I've got 170 staff, there's only 5 of us at the moment on the senior management team, and that's really small and obviously that I'm going to be expanding. The people that I have around me are attention to detail, implementers, highly operational, all the things that I'm not. So, yes, everybody trusts me, and my board trust me to come up with solutions, ideas and innovation because I've been around for so long. My brain is, you know, it enjoys it, it's wired to it.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

So tell me, how did you get there then? Tell me your background. How did you get to Traid? What were you doing before that? What's driven you to become the person that can really think like that, join the dots and see these ideas?

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

Okay, so I left school with no education. But whilst at school helped out at school jumble sale and somehow just, like, fell in love with secondhand clothes. And so I ran off to London. Anyway I was managing stores, I wasn't happy. It was the 80s and I gave it all up and went to volunteer at my local Oxfam shop. I just wanted to go back to secondhand clothes, and I got some cleaning jobs to support that. And then one day I was on a coach going to an airport to go to Barcelona, and next to me was The *Guardian* jobs section, so I read it out of boredom and then saw the job for Traid. It survived my weekend of debauchery, and faxed my CV through and became the Head of Retail, and then a couple of years later the CEO.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Fantastic, so you've really grown through the ranks then at Traid. You've been the person, I guess, throughout that contributing new ideas, showing initiative, being the intrapreneur that then made it to the top. What do you think the

business around you did, or environment you were working in, that gave you, I don't like the word permission, I think that's...

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

No, you're 100%, and I totally understand that question. I hate being given permission to do anything, so I avoid it.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

You do the opposite when you give them permission. I do. Yes so I don't like drama,

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

I don't like having to go to a board with an idea, have a yes or no, a discussion about it, because my instinct tells me what's right and wrong. So how I get around this is, I do very small pilot for something. So I started a home collection scheme. Imagine going to a board of trustees and saying, you know, I want £200,000 for all these vans and marketing and livery. So I just got one of the vans we were using anyway to sneakily go out and put some flyers through people's letterboxes in Muswell Hill and saw what we could collect. I built this

home-collection service from that. Then from my pilot I can then take it to the board and say, look at this, look at the potential. And then they tried it on.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

I like that. Do you know the story about how Pepsi ended up making crisps? So when they were having this big battle with Coca-Cola about who's bigger, Pepsi at a time that was probably more appropriate to say this, sat down as a board and said, what do people do when they drink Coke or when they drink Pepsi? Well, they eat chocolate, they eat crisps, they eat whatever else. They said, great why don't we own the whole family? Most companies would do that, and they'd say we're gonna invest $100 million in a crisp factory and a chocolate factory and a crisp truck and a crisp warehouse, whatever else. They bought 10,000 bags of white-labelled crisps, they got an intern to design a brand. They launched it overnight on their existing trucks into their existing supermarkets and said, look, we sell a lot of product through you guys, just give me a shelf for a week. We don't worry about contracting, just give me a shelf for a week and see what happens. And they sold out all of those crisps instantly and went yeah, this is one. We can we can invest in this, we can grow this. But they didn't try and reinvent the wheel. They sort of looked at it and went, okay, what do we already have? Like you, I've already got a van, I've already got a route, I've already got places I know that are worthwhile delivering leaflets to. They already had a truck, they already had a supply chain, they bought a few bags of crisps, they made a quick set of branding, and launched it to see what would happen. I think to me that's the essence of innovation. It's not writing a lot

of post-it notes and writing lots of blog posts; it's getting up and getting on with it, seeing what happens. I really like that as an approach. Duncan, I guess in your business, in your role, you're working with other clients and other agencies, and you must have a team of people who are looking at what a client does and going, we could do it better this way. They should be doing it like this, they should be doing it like that. Is that what you find within your team, that you have lots of people who have a million ways they can see from the outside how to do things differently, and you have to funnel those ideas into something executional? Is that a fair reflection?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

I think that's a bit of it Josh, but I'd also add, and I think this links really importantly into the theme of the conversation about intrapreneurs, is that a lot of the good ideas are already there in the business a lot of the time. And one of the important things about unlocking innovation in the business is getting decisions to be made where the good information is, and to get to the point Maria was just making around being able to test things out, being able to see how it works in practice and then making some decisions based on that. And so whilst I think it's fair to say that our team would go in and come up with new ideas, also it's around understanding what the business knows and what the business can do. I think one of the one of the big differences, to go back to your point you just made around the difference between an intrapreneur and an entrepreneur, is around taking advantage of the competitive advantage of the business that's already there. So whereas an entrepreneur's maybe got a good

idea, maybe they've got a bit of technology or something that they've developed, and that's what they're really pushing. An intrapreneur, has access to a whole raft of different sets of expertise and sets of skills and brands, products, services. A whole range of different things to draw on, where they can identify what the competitive advantage that their business has, and then put together a plan to innovate based on that. So it just opens up this whole toolbox that a business has already without necessarily having to come up with something completely brand new. Up with it and around it.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

So how would you... If your client came to you and said, right, I need somebody to come and utilise all of this resource I have, and within my day-to-day processes that doesn't happen. We're not an innovation engine, we're a process-driven organisation meant to deliver something safely and predictably. How do I inspire a few select people across the business to come and wreak havoc? What would you say? What's critical to creating that environment?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

I think there's a number of ways to skin that cat Josh. I think one one of them is just getting the opportunity for people to speak and for people to listen as well. A lot of organisations maybe don't do that as much as they could and should. So one of the things that we do when we're asked to fulfil that sort of role that you just explained, is to go and give people that sort of chance. The cliché of

working on the business rather than in the business but getting chance to step back from the day to day, and they talk about what what the art of the possible looks like, and test that as well. And I think the point's been made at times, Darryl spoke about the framework that his business uses; Maria spoke about piloting different ideas, is the opportunity to take the insights that people within the business have, test it out and understand when something can fail or when something can succeed. And when you pursue a good idea, and when actually something is a good idea, but it's not the right time for it and you don't pursue it. And that framework and that process that you can build around it is really an important part of making it work for a business.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Making change predictable. I think it's quite interesting, when you talk to a lot of business gurus and you read a lot of business books about innovation and change, they refer to various businesses that implemented things like 15% time. Whether you'd say, right, 15% of all your time at work is free to you to explore, invent, whatever you want and see what happens. And famously, things like the Post-it note came out of programmes like that. But I think it's hard, because unless you've got a perfectly structured team who are well motivated and everything else, that 15% time very quickly ends up down the pub. But it's quite easily fixed, but I don't think often understood that actually, that's more of a PR exercise, isn't it? If somebody works in any level of the business, and I'll tell you what, the people that earn the least and sit lowest down a hypothetical chain, tend to be the people who know most about what needs to change within a

business to make it more efficient. The way to get them to contribute is not to say, here's a suggestions box, please tell me how to make my next $100 million, is it? Where's the motivation? And even a small bonus isn't really going to change things. The most important part of getting people to contribute, in my experiences in the various businesses that I work with, is opportunity. It's not, you know, oh, you're going to get an extra £100,000 or whatever it might be, it's, if you contribute something and we work on this, you have the opportunity to come and spend some of your working day being part of that programme or have some say in how it works and how it happens. And so that's where you start to get, it doesn't matter if it's the person who leads R&D or it's the person that works in the warehouse who brought the idea forwards. They get to be part of the journey and feel ownership of that idea and feel the credit as well. And I think it's quick to forget who contributes these ideas, and actually some of that is the most important part of creating that culture for contribution.

Do you not think?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

Yes, I can completely agree with that. I think the other thing to add to it as well, and to go with that sort of mindset, culture and recognition, is creating the urgency around it as well. I think a lot of really good ideas in businesses don't go anywhere because they just don't feel urgent to act upon. And there's not maybe a burning platform, and so no one ever really takes things forward in the

way that could do. So alongside that sort of structure, to give people the incentive to bring forward the good ideas, is to make sure that they've also got that sort of thrust to move it forward within the business as well. If you're if you're an entrepreneur, you might have bet your house on your idea. It's got to work, there is a lot of urgency in making it work. If you're an intrapreneur and you're on a salary, it might not necessarily be the case, so how do you come up with a way of giving people that sort of push, that urgency to make sure that change, improvement is at the top of the to-do list. Rather than a sort of, nice to have add on.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Interesting. I mean, part of being an intrapreneur is trying to enact change, and quite often, I think those who could be intrapreneurs are in environments that may not be as permissible to creating change and stepping out and trying something new. Have you got any advice for people that might want to be an intrapreneur, don't feel they're in the environment to do so without jumping ship, changing jobs and all the rest of it? Are there things that people can do to try and instil some of that culture around them, maybe within their own team or even managing upwards one layer or two?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

I think you have got to get the support of people around you for it to work. I think one of the biggest blockers to innovation is lack of support from the

management team. Good ideas will fail if we don't have the resource, the time, the funds to make it work. But I think sometimes people need a bit of proof as well. Again, Maria made the point about piloting stuff, getting the proof point yourself sometimes. To make sure that you've got the argument, that something deserves the attention, something deserves the investment, and really creating the business case for others to buy in to what you want to achieve.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Interesting. So Darryl, if I come back to you and talk about investment, obviously you're making a lot of, well, quite innovative products, but quite often client driven it sounds. Thinking about what Duncan's saying about creating an environment that shows opportunity and kind of gives, again I hate the word permission, but gives space for change. Are you also investing in technologies that might not have a direct client opportunity now, but you can see a future.

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

It's a very good question. Yes, all the time. I think we're always looking for not necessarily what a customer is asking for but what we think they need. I think it's important to not necessarily just focus on the here and now but also focus on current and future requirements and where things are going to be heading.
I think probably around the conversation around moving towards cultural change is something that we've definitely been looking at or something that we've been deploying within our organisation. From previous organisations that

I've worked in, getting on board with those big cultural shifts have been one of the most important, probably one of the most successful programmes I've been involved in. In one of my previous organisations, we implemented Kaizen which is the Japanese principle, exactly as we've been talking, those small incremental changes. But seeing that cultural shift, as people recognise that their small contributions, their small ideas on how we can improve on a process, we can be more efficient, whatever it is, can make a massive overall difference. It really showed massive positive change within the organisation I was working in. It changed the culture, and it made everyone feel like they needed to be pushing towards intrapreneurialship. So I think having those programmes in place that are listened to, that are acted upon and they have kind of a feedback loop as well. I think it's easy to say, well, we'll listen to any suggestion and we'll implement it, but often those suggestions may not actually be functional, and there needs to be a reason for it. You do need a filter, so it's just as important to act on those suggestions as it is to have a feedback loop of the suggestions you're not going to act on. So that people understand why you're not taking their ideas, their innovations on board, and explain it, I suppose, is really important though.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Do you find you also capitalise on that world of intrapreneurs? Do you seek them out within your customers as the people that would champion and inspire their business to look at new technologies for you or someone else? Is that some part of the strategy to try and find the intrapreneurs? It certainly is for us. It's to

find the people who want to drive change because they want to work with people like us that can come and bring that change.

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

Yes, I think an important part of change management is understanding that everyone's on a different cycle. So we want to find those early adopters. Those are the people that are going to help us test, they're going to help be our case study. And often those will be the people that kind of shout the loudest about the change. And it comes with social proofing. The more people that are on board that are seeing the positive benefit, the more likely those naysayers will get behind it. So absolutely, we want to seek out those early adopters, those innovators, those intrapreneurs, and get them on our side so that we can quickly move forwards.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Are there any key ways that you identify them, or is it all about what's said in a meeting? Do you have another way of seeking them out within a business?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

There's a term in marketing called mavens, and these are a kind of people that are obsessive when it comes to a particular product. And that's what we try to do, we look for those mavens within an organisation. They tend to be really

obvious. You probably have a maven that you go down the pub with, that is obsessed about one particular subject, and every time you have a pint with them they bring that topic up. We want to find those people to our particular use case, so people that are obsessive about one particular thing. And try to leverage them towards our mindset and our focus. I think often they're fairly obvious to find, it's just about listening. And you can set – in marketing, it's all about capturing people's attention – we set what are called maven traps, so ways that we can get these people to easily communicate with us.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

I have this vision of a giant rat trap. That's the business. Interesting. Okay, that's really interesting that an intrapreneur might not be that sort of media-led, jack-of-all-trades person. They might be a real expert in something very specific, but they're a champion of it and an implementer of it. Yes. Interesting. Maria, in your business, I assume, knowing you're in your role, you're looking for the next you, the next intrapreneur that might make their way into your shoes. How do you identify those people, and how are you trying to support them?

Yes that's 100% correct, because I am knocking on in time.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Not quite what I intended…

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

So in both Charity Super.MKt with my co-founder partner and within Traid, this is really, really difficult. So especially dealing with clothes and ideas, it's very, very, very hard to find people with this lunacy for ideas and lunacy to be able to make things happen. Even so, with Charity Super.Mkt, so Wayne and I, we go to this big, dirty warehouse on a Monday morning, like seven in the morning people wouldn't imagine it. And we're there sorting clothes and real ground-level stuff. It's honestly, and he says, people must think we're down on our luck, but we're doing it because no one else has this eye. I don't want to say that egotistically. You know, I'm quite out of date when it comes to fashion but somehow I have this eye that we can't seem to train other people. But we have to, because something can't be dependent on us. So when we curate our product line ourselves, it flies out the door. It looks amazing. But again, it's because we've been around for so long. Our beginnings were in jumble sales, his was in jumble sales. You know, I was at Oxfam millions of years ago, I've been in my industry for 35 years, so Traid will need a replacement of me one day. But, I don't know where.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Find them before you can foster them.

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

Because the wrong person will kill the organisation. There's no doubt that I did take over from somebody who was nearly killing the organisation. I had to turn it all around, you know, we were about to close the doors. Maybe that's a whole different discussion, people that kill organisations...

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

But yes.

Let me let me ask you this then, and I should like the answer from all three of you, and it's probably quite a nice topic to end this session on. If you were to find that person and you were to identify an intrapreneur within your business, or several even, what what are the things that you might do to try and create an environment to support them and ensure that, whilst not giving them such an easy path that they're no longer intrapreneurial, make sure that they're getting an opportunity to contribute to your business and drive things forwards?

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

Most of my staff have been promoted up the ranks, you know, so my Finance Manager started as a volunteer. He came over from India, did an MBA in Cardiff,

started doing data entry, he is now a Finance Director. I've put him on a HR course as well. Oh my God, he's so good at his job and he's so super loyal to me because I took him. He's been with me for like 12 years. So, I see something in someone, and as a CEO I'm also the gatekeeper to resources, you know, what are very privileged positions. I will give people all the resources they need to thrive. Roberto, he's my Operations Director. He's amazing. I let him design a huge warehouse. They were the happiest days of his life, design how it's all going to be made, where the trucks go. So I give people what they really enjoy and what they thrive at and let people grow. But still, this intrapreneurial mentality is a bit of a rarity, I feel. I think I probably got something cognitively a bit dysfunctional. But I get so high on new ideas and making something wildly different, it's like the biggest high ever. I liken it to like being how a gambler would feel.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

So you're always building on those skills, right? You went on to do an MBA and have continued to be involved with The Open University. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

Yeah I left school with no qualifications, and I thought I wanted to learn the language of business. So I had a new chair at the time, and I knew she was

going to ask me the question, what training do you need? And again you know, being a bit rebellious, I said, tongue in cheek, an MBA. And she looked really startled, and then she said okay. So I applied to The Open University, and they've got the open door policy, and I thought they're not going to say yes, and they said, okay. It's like, oh my God, what have I let myself in for?

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

You've got to do it now.

Maria Chenoweth, Chief Executive - Traid, Honorary Doctor, The Open University

I've got to do it now. Oh my gosh. Anyway, I did do it. And then I continued interacting with the OU because there were some elements of the business module, you know, there was nothing about the environment. I got very heavily involved in climate and the climate change and activism, and there was nothing there. So I kept going back, annoying them, and then that's sort of how my relationship formed, and I've been interacting ever since. Also, I've got a PhD student who's going to be working with Traid from The Open University. She's from Bangladesh. Super exciting project. I've got four children's centres in Bangladesh, so garment workers, they have somewhere to leave their children in a safe environment when they do their awful hours, very long hours in factories. She's going to go and measure the impact. So that's just going to be

amazing, whether it's negative or positive, what better we can be doing. So my work continues.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Brilliant.

That's great. Thank you, Maria. Duncan, let me ask you to finish on that as well. If you'd identified some people within your business who you felt were intrapreneurs that really had the capacity to contribute to the business, how would you give them the space and build the culture that makes sure these people are encouraged to really continue to contribute and feel rewarded for their contribution as well?

Duncan Levesley, Director, Grant Thornton

I think clarity on objectives is really important. I mean that in not necessarily putting black and white markers down but giving people a really good sense of what's a good result, what's a bad result, what's somewhere in between. So people know what they're working to and working for is really important. And alongside that is really good communications. That's got to be a two-way street, that people feel able to be open and honest. I think the advantage an intrapreneur has over an entrepreneur is that there is a wider set of skills available to them. You don't necessarily have to be able to do

everything yourself as a master of every trade to be successful. And so the honesty of someone who's trying to do that within the firm to be able to say, you know what, actually this is really important, but it's not necessarily my skill set, and I can bring someone else in to support this. It's going to increase everyone's chance of success. So I think it's a combination of a bit of clarity on what good looks like, plus really open communications in every direction.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

Fantastic and Darryl, finally with you in a business that is, by the sounds of it, majority intrapreneurs, how do you maintain that culture, how do you make sure that doesn't change and people continue to contribute?

Darryl Merkli, Head of AI Studio & Services, HUT 3

Sure, I think in terms of attracting the right people, in hopefully the most sensible way, open the door to the obsessive, I think you need to very clearly identify what is your culture, what are the passions within that culture and build that as part of your brand so that people are attracted to you as an organisation. If you can attract people that are truly obsessive in your mission, your focus, your goals, then those are the people that are going to come into your organisation. They're going to get behind their objectives that you're putting in place. They're going to come up with the ideas, and they're going to relentlessly put that time into evolving. Those people will be very strong minded and opinionated, so you also need to find ways to give them measurement, give them goals and to keep

them on track. But by building out that culture of innovation I think you can attract the right people and kind of fuel that within your own organisation. But I think as the other two have said, it's incredibly important to have metrics, goals and obsessively track everything so you can see the progress that is being made. I think people really want to see that as well. Exactly. People want to see that they're making a difference, so by giving people the tools and the ability to see their change, I think you can really drive positive innovation.

Josh Valman, host and CEO of RPDK

I think that's a fantastic point to end on. The three of you, thank you very much for your contributions today. I think if I can paraphrase and sum it up, to build a culture for intrapreneurs, we need to create space, really. We need to acknowledge that that may mean a distraction from day-to-day work, but understanding what people are doing, showing that we have a need for their contribution, showing direction of what is it we're looking for change in, what is it looking for contribution in? Giving people that space but also giving them targets, maybe more generally or maybe specifically to people that you might have identified as contributors to your business. And, I think, most importantly, communicating that back, communicating there's an opportunity for you here for you to build your own future within our business. But also, here's the impact you're having, here's the data that shows that and here's what you yourself have contributed. So, thank you very much, everybody for all of your time. We are at the end of our second session of a four-part webinar series on intrapreneurialism. The next episode will be coming out in a further two weeks,

and we'll be focusing on how to make a difference, particularly in digital and AI. So you can join us online to see that course or look back at the other episodes in the series. Thank you very much.