



IMPACT STORY

US Commercial Service

ExperiencePoint®



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Abandoning the Comfort Zone: Proactively Creating the Conditions for Innovation to Thrive

Client

U.S. Commercial Service is the trade promotion arm of the U.S. Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration. U.S. Commercial Service trade professionals in more than 100 U.S. cities and in more than 75 countries help U.S. companies get started in exporting or increase sales to new global markets.

Through Export.gov, the organization brings together resources from across the U.S. government to assist American businesses in planning their international sales strategies so they can succeed in today's global marketplace. With information on trade events, tariffs and export counselling assistance, Export.gov helps American exporters participate in the global marketplace and navigate the international sales process while avoiding potential pitfalls.

Challenge

As Director of Global Teams at U.S. Commercial Service, Brad Anderson leads a diverse group of 23 teams across industries and global regions that support small- and medium-sized U.S. companies in their efforts to develop export markets globally. **His team members face a challenge that is familiar to many organizations today: how to effectively collaborate, communicate and create the space for innovation in a fast-paced, geographically dispersed business environment.** As a result, each year Brad invests in training for these teams to give them the opportunity to collaborate

with their colleagues around the world and help them continually bring strong business acumen and innovative ideas to their clients.

“Because we’re more of a matrixed organization, we have a fair bit of autonomy to innovate, lead change and try new things,” he says.

In looking at the overall organization and issues he wanted to address for 2015, he realized that not much had changed in the way the organization had operated over the past 20 years. Recognizing that a stale organization can’t remain successful in a constantly changing world, he wanted to get people inspired to find new ways of doing business and pushing the organization out of its comfort zones. As a result, he determined that the focus for the program in 2015 would be on leading innovation and change in a large organization. Because these leaders are fairly early in their careers, he also felt this would offer them additional support by giving them new ways to solve problems.

With this focus identified, Brad set out to find the most appropriate innovation methodology and associated training solutions to develop his team and prepare them to meet the challenge. His quest led him to Silicon Valley, widely considered to be the epicenter for innovation in the United States, if not the world.

“There’s a vibe there that’s different in business,” says Brad. “Risk-taking and innovation are rewarded—even failure is rewarded rather than punished. I thought, if that’s the epicenter of innovative thinking, then surely there are companies in the area providing training to inspire more of it.”

His hunch paid off. While there, he met with a variety of different companies to learn about their innovation training solutions, and was impressed with the quality and qualifications of them. One approach, in particular, consistently stood out.

“*Design thinking* emerged as the approach that everyone seemed to be using,” he says. “I quickly realized, if the thought leaders around innovation are using *design thinking*, then I want my group taking that approach, too.”

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Brad Anderson
U.S. Department of Commerce

When he spoke to representatives at IDEO, the award-winning design consultancy that pioneered *design thinking*, they recommended he get in touch with ExperiencePoint. ExperiencePoint's ExperienceInnovation™ training solution, they explained, was developed in collaboration with IDEO and would provide Brad's team with not only hands-on experience with *design thinking* but also the tools to quickly start applying it to tackle their immediate business challenges.

Through IDEO's referral, Brad met with the ExperiencePoint team, who discussed with him his specific needs, goals and objectives. Based on his requirements, they suggested he implement the company's ExperienceInnovation™: Apply program, a workshop that allows participants to master the *design thinking* methodology and immediately apply the learnings to a real organizational challenge. Brad was particularly enthusiastic that the program had a gamification aspect and that it would get people out of the classroom after the workshop and have them talking to real companies, conducting interviews

Ultimately, while he met with six innovation training consultants over a day and a half, Brad decided that ExperiencePoint's solutions, approach and trainers, combined with the company's partnership with IDEO, would be the right fit for his team and objectives.

Solution

In July of 2015, the 23 Global Team Leaders, along with representatives of the training advisory council from the organization's Washington, D.C., headquarters, assembled at IDEO's San Francisco offices for the ExperienceInnovation™: Apply workshop.

"We held our training at IDEO studios, which was great," Brad says. "As part of the training, we got tours of IDEO to understand how they work. That, coupled with the ExperienceInnovation™ training experience, was a perfect match for us."

The one-and-a-half day training centered around four specific challenge statements that the participants were asked to tackle by applying *design thinking* methods:

- How might we create meaningful introductions between potential partners?
- How might we spark local interest in the goods and services of American firms?
- How might we help high value service organizations develop the right relationships for international success?
- How might we create the conditions for innovative behavior to thrive?

Based on the insights they gained during the program, they developed four ideas for testing following the workshop:

1. Fly With Me, for companies on the Gold Key Matching Service (GKS) to ensure the client has success in the market.
2. DIY-PP (Do-It-Yourself Performance Plan), tied to inspiring more passion in the organization and its work by having employees create their own FY16 performance plans and determine their goals for the year.
3. Gap Year in Industry Detail, an experiment in developing expertise through private sector temporary duty assignments (TDYs).
4. e-Tradeucation (e-Introduction), developing a video introduction for the pre-GKS meeting.

Results

Now that the program has been implemented and leaders are back with their teams, Brad says the overall experience “exceeded expectations,” adding that the post-training participant surveys

revealed an average of 96% satisfaction **“the highest satisfaction rates for any training I’ve ever done in the 10 years that I’ve been with the USCS.”**

Through the workshop and post-workshop innovation experiments that each group was tasked with running, the team leaders are stepping up to their responsibilities for infusing a culture of innovation within their teams. He says the program has both encouraged and equipped them to innovate and, through their strategic plans, take some risks and look at how to do things differently. Not only that, it is reinforcing his philosophy that if success is the sum of lessons learned from trying and failing, we need to start trying.

As for the specific experiments, Brad can speak from first-hand experience about the progress of DIY-PP. As the lead on that experiment, he has assigned seven of his direct reports to create their own FY16 performance plans. He says the goal is to give people more autonomy and to capture into the plans what each person thinks they’re best at contributing to the organization. After this initial test, they’ll evaluate the idea based on several factors, including:

- Does it help with employee performance? Do employees feel empowered and that their contributions have been captured adequately?
- Is this an approach that should be scaled? If it proves to be that much better than the previous ways of doing things, Brad says they’ll share the results of the experiment with senior management and suggest that this method be used going forward.

Looking back on the experience, Brad attributes the program’s effectiveness to the ExperiencePoint team.

“They did an outstanding job and were just outstanding to work with,” he says. “The thing that stood out to me and to many of my colleagues was how good ExperiencePoint’s team was and how good of a job they did reading the room and adjusting as they went. They know their stuff, and that really made the training.”

Having completed this first foray into *design thinking*, Brad says the organization is still working out next steps, but in the meantime, the leaders are finishing the innovation experiments they started in the training and looking for new ways to lead change and innovation within their teams. And they're looking forward to continually applying the concepts to support U.S. businesses as they compete in the global marketplace and to keep pace with an ever-changing world.

About ExperienceInnovation™

ExperienceInnovation™ is an energizing workshop that challenges teams to flex their creativity to solve a realistic and complex design challenge. In so doing, they engage with the terms, techniques, and thought patterns of successful innovators.

ExperienceInnovation™ was created in collaboration with IDEO, an award-winning global design firm that takes a human-centered design approach to helping organizations in the public and private sectors innovate and grow.

About ExperiencePoint

At ExperiencePoint, we're passionate about how people work together to get stuff done. We're an award winning training company that develops business simulations for leadership development in the areas of change and innovation. We're known for realistic simulation experiences that challenge people to roll up their sleeves and learn the Whats, Whys and Hows of leading change and innovation. We work with the Fortune 100 and the world's leading business schools.