THE COMPANY: A nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the demand for and profitability of cotton through research and promotion.

THE GOAL: Align diverse departments under one mission of sustainable, repeatable innovation.

THE RESULTS: Three new promising ideas in less than one year.

"Eventually the goal should be to have the process of innovation embedded in your culture; not directed from an executive level."

— Kim Kitchings
VP, Corporate Strategy and Program Metrics

One of the biggest challenges in innovation is getting teams who don’t normally work together to collaborate on each other’s ideas to produce new opportunities. The most successful innovators can work around these silos and create new processes that lead to valuable breakthroughs.

Cotton Incorporated has a rich tradition in innovation. Most of its breakthroughs have occurred through traditional commercial R&D channels, not as a pervasive discipline shared by the entire organization.

Bill Rearick, director of Finishing Research and Kim Kitchings, vice president of the Corporate Strategy and Program Metrics division at Cotton Incorporated, and many others wanted to change that
Embedding Innovation Across the Enterprise at Cotton Incorporated

structure. They sought processes that would make innovation a repeatable discipline and an enterprise-wide capability.

“Creating multi-disciplinary innovation teams has made a real difference in the effectiveness of our R&D,” Rearick said. “Having the right tools to manage and evaluate ideas is essential.”

Overcoming silos
In 2011 Cotton’s leadership saw its product-development pipeline become thin and researchers still produced without a clearly defined market. The Product Development and Implementation division wanted to assess and develop new ideas and then implement them in a timely way to recharge their pipeline.

The company’s strategy team began by defining and establishing a shared corporate understanding of innovation. The organization’s innovation strategy made it clear that failure, in the context of breakthrough innovation, is natural. With a shared view of corporate innovation in place, the company sought new opportunities.

Innovation Central, Imaginatik’s collaboration platform, helped ignite ideas, open communication and get people collaborating across divisions and continents. After ideas were collected, the Head to Head review tool was employed to help the company quickly determine the ideas that should be a priority from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. The tool enabled staff to compare ideas side-by-side and provided a rich behind-the-scenes view of how ideas stacked up against each other.

A newly innovative culture
A new stage-gate process, made possible with Imaginatik’s advisory services, is helping Cotton Incorporated understand how the organization’s research is going to market.

SEEING RESULTS
In the eight months since launching its first collaborative event in Innovation Central, three of Cotton Incorporated’s projects were selected for implementation, and are in process to be taken to market.

“IT’s very easy to get busy doing everyday things; taking care of daily fires. You do have to carve out time for innovation, make it a priority, and have an advocate who will take it to the board meetings. Eventually, the goal should be to have the process of innovation embedded in your culture; not directed from an executive level.” – Kim Kitchings
Embedding Innovation Across the Enterprise at Cotton Incorporated

The organization now enjoys a collaborative forum for sharing and collecting ideas that works regardless of tenure or hierarchy.

“There’s a certain structure and culture that tends to exist and we wanted to break down the barriers,” Kitchings said. “The additional advisory capability has been great in teaching staff how to construct stage gates and providing a reliable communication platform.”

MORE ONLINE

Watch a video explaining the innovation partnership between Cotton Inc. and Imaginatik at:

http://youtu.be/n6fMjCrVKxs