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APPROACH FOR TRAINING AND COACHING BUSINESSES

Introduction

Developing an approach for training and coaching businesses is an essential part of the strategy to stimulate innovation in SMEs. After creating the right climate, establishing the framework for change and inspiring SMEs with evidence based solutions to work on innovation, the time has come to engage SMEs into a training and coaching program to actually start innovating.

During the PROFIT project, the partners developed an Innovation training and coaching program for SMEs based on following principles

1. **Stimulate process & innovation thinking by engaging the SMEs in a training program**
 - Make sure SMEs are willing to fully engage in the innovation program
2. **Push implementation** by engaging SMEs in a **coaching program** supported by a multidisciplinary team of experts

Approach for training and coaching businesses

1. Stimulate process & innovation thinking by engaging the SMEs in a training program

After creating the right climate, establishing the framework for change and inspiring SMEs with evidence based solutions to work on innovation, the time has come to **engage SMEs into a training program to actually start innovating.**

SMEs have been taken on a journey by detecting their needs and defining the specific challenges for their destination based on the DNA of the region. In a Service Design process, SMEs learned to take a step back and to take into account the wishes of their visitors when developing new products and services for their business with the help of experts. Innovation has been put into practice by visiting colleagues with an innovative concept in the own region or another region.

The aim of building an innovation training and coaching program for SMES is **to put into practice the common story, goals and perspective**

- Let the SMEs use the defined common goals based on the business needs
- Let the SMEs use the common story based on the DNA of the region
- Let the SMEs use the common perspective: put the visitor first
- Inspire your SMEs with best practices on the field

In this process, a shared strategy has been built that is informed by bottom-up feedback by the SMEs on **priority themes** during the early stages of business engagement. The shared strategy should demonstrate significant commonality in the challenges the businesses face in their region. Based on the priority themes you can put forward specific topics to build your training and coaching program. Building a common public-private story is vital in stimulating innovation. We should make the transfer to other SMEs, because for every public-private cooperation in whatever industry, the success of common innovation will depend from the **common story, common goals and common perspective.**

Make sure SMEs are willing to fully engage in the innovation program

- **Set out the topics based on the priority themes put forward by your SMEs**

It is vital to start your training and coaching program from the business needs put forward by your SMEs when working on innovation. Go talk with your businesses, show them that you are willing to work together on specific themes and define common goals taking into account the identity of your region.

PROFIT CASE

In PROFIT common priorities for tourism businesses in the 2 Seas area that were detected:

- ✓ *DNA of the region = using the assets and strengths of the region in your business to attract visitors, to work towards repeat visits, to make your business more*

- ✓ *Seasonality = focusing on broadening the season with specific actions, package deals, tips and activities for all weather conditions ...*
- ✓ *Business management = work towards an efficient management*
- ✓ *Digital marketing = focus on specific target groups with specific actions*
- ✓ *Product development*
- ✓ *Collaboration*
- ✓ *...*

■ **Use your common story based on the DNA of the region**

Provide narratives and practical tools in order to connect with the local and regional DNA

- While developing the DNA of your region, make sure to work with narratives and provide practical tools. This DNA serves as a framework for both destinations and public tourism agencies as well as for individual SMEs that can get inspired by this DNA. Narratives and practical tools can help SMEs to identify with the local and regional DNA & actually use it in their business. When SMEs adopt the regional narratives and DNA in their activities, it allows them to showcase not only their business but also their wider connection with the destination
- Learn SMEs how to use the DNA in Master Classes and individual coaching and provide narratives and practical tools such as inspirational booklets, testimonials of other SMEs already using the DNA in their business, animations, a Coastal Café, a Tourism Academy ...
- The DNA serves commercial and promotional activities through the storylines it contains, inspiration on certain products or services that could be offered at destination or SME level, also it creates opportunities to encourage touristic SMEs in a certain region to work together and sometimes even develop new combined deals for customers. The DNA and narratives encourages the SMEs to look beyond the scope of their individual organization. The DNA can inspire SMEs to do things differently, to adapt their strategy in communication, offer, ...

■ **Engage SMEs for an innovation journey, create time at the right time and use a personal approach**

- Don't organise ad-hoc sessions, but engage your SMEs by making them part of an **innovation journey and use a focused approach**. Don't organise general workshops, but very focused Master Classes. By doing so, the different elements build on each other and will then have a real impact. Invite all your SMES to a series of inspirational **Master Classes** with topics based on both SME and visitor needs. These Master Classes serve as inspiration for the Innovation program, to inspire SMEs with very specific and concrete cases. If you can show them how focusing on one of these topics can really benefit their business with practical examples, they will be interested to jump in.

PROFIT CASE

Based on the topics "Product Development", "Digital Marketing", "Business Management" & "Collaboration" an Innovation Programme for SMEs was developed. A series of Master Classes inspired SMEs to work with their DNA, creativity, Big Data and the various Action Plans already developed in PROFIT.

- **Time and timing are essential!** In general, tourism SMEs are always lacking time. They own Small to Medium sized businesses, are caught up in daily management as they often lack managing staff. Therefore, they are not easily convinced to participate in meetings or Master Classes. Create time and thinking space for your SMEs from their day to day arrangements and help them take a step back and look at their business in a different way. Get them literally out of their business so they have time to think. Don't focus only on workshops, but take them on an Inspiration Trip, inspire them with stories from their colleagues. On top of that, the timing of organising an Innovation program is essential. Some periods are not fit for organising activities for tourism SMEs. Approaching businesses or organising activities during the summer high season and especially the period right before and right after (May, June, September) are not recommended. The managers of SMEs are fully focused on their core business in these periods.
- **Go for a personal approach and use the data and technical tools in your advance.** Build a strong relationship with your SMEs by setting out common goals for your destination based on the available data. As destination management organisation or knowledge institute, you own a lot of data from the region, but also from the businesses in your region. Use the insights from these datasets to show businesses the relevance of cooperating and innovation and convince them to participate in your Innovation program. Don't make it too hard on your SMEs with a series of new tools. We all have Facebook, platforms & websites we are used to work with. These are easy communication tools where you can find one another. Contact them directly via the communication channels they like to use: Facebook, by phone, face to face ...

■ **Use the collaboration force: Ecosystem approach**

Working collectively on the same topics is important because of the specific characteristics of the tourism industry. As described in the introduction, tourism is a phenomenon in which businesses are strongly interwoven. The whole network of businesses need to fit the 'picture'. An ecosystem approach at destination level is important, with all relevant stakeholders involved, public authorities at regional and local level, destination marketing organisations, development agencies, research partners and businesses themselves. By doing so, all expertise, manpower and budgets available for tourism in different organisations can be combined and used in the most effective way.

2. Push implementation by engaging SMEs in a coaching program supported by a multidisciplinary team of experts

After all previous steps, at the end of the Master Classes, **SMEs are in the mood for innovation**. They are involved, the right topics are selected, they have received inspiration from fellow businesses and have built on their knowledge through the collective training programme (Master Classes). Now it's **time for implementation** and this **can only be done on the level of individual businesses**.

This step is often forgotten in innovation support programmes, but is essential to success. Too often, it happens that participants of collective training programmes are highly inspired, but return to their daily business and lack the time and/or decisiveness to start with implementation. Therefore, an individual follow-up is necessary.

▪ Facilitate real change: From inspiration to innovation

Use a tailored approach that is hands-on and create an Innovation Package deal for SMEs

To push implementation and take SMEs further on the innovation journey, following a couple of steps can help: invite the SMEs that took part in the various Master Classes to join the next step of the innovation journey. Let them sign up for the actual Innovation coaching program: from inspiration towards implementation. SMEs that want to sign up should be asked to **really engage** in the program and take part in all separate actions and actually work out an Innovation Plan for their business. SMEs that are not willing to engage in all steps of the program, will drop out. The **Innovation package deal**, should consist of

- ✓ A number of individual coaching sessions by an expert on a specific topic
- ✓ followed by the writing of a personal Innovation Plan with concrete steps to take for implementation
- ✓ and take part in an expert dating event to finetune their personal Innovation Plan

PROFIT CASE

Through the PROFIT individual coaching program, SMEs worked with innovation experts on their personal innovation challenge and were able to transform a specific idea into concrete action. The individual innovation challenges were further refined during Expert Dating sessions after speaking with a team of experts. Finally, these were written down in tailored Innovation Plans by a business advisor/ personal coach. These Innovation Plans have been a great starting point to help businesses prioritise ideas that will lead to generating more profit for entrepreneurs. Specifically, entrepreneurs received guidance on the DNA of the region, seasonal expansion, product development, business management, collaboration, big data and marketing. To implement their personal innovation challenge and innovation plan, SMEs need to invest in their business. These investments will further develop the coastal region as a 4-season destination.

We can promote this approach to work with a complete program instead of individual sessions or actions. This allows you to work in depth with the SMEs and really focus on a specific topic. They are engaged, want to work towards a result and it makes your relationship stronger.

- **Look for the right expertise: provide a multidisciplinary team of coaches with varying backgrounds and different fields of expertise for individual coaching**

Make sure to find dedicated experts that have the right expertise linked to the common goals you have set with the SMEs in your region. Use coaches with varying backgrounds and different fields of expertise, and make them work together (business planning, HR, branding, price setting, ...). After all, all aspects of a business are linked and influence each other. When working on innovation in a SME the individual fields of expertise should not be seen separate.

- Match SMEs that are engaged in your coaching program with a specific expert for individual coaching, based on the personal innovation challenge of the business. Let the expert really dive into the business case and make the expert the dedicated coach for that particular SME.
- In a next step, make a team of the different experts you work with, a team that works together. Bring the experts together and go over all the innovation plans with them as a team. This will make the Innovation Plans even stronger and more innovative, since you can rely on a multidisciplinary vision and expertise that overlooks the business as a whole.
- A team becomes truly innovative, multidisciplinary and an actual team, when the experts refer to another coach or even pass on an Innovation case if they see the innovation challenge needs another or additional expertise.

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