



How we stifle innovation...



... and 7 things you can do to promote and nurture it

It seems like innovation is everywhere – on every company mission and values statement, recruitment and position description, advertisement, website and circular – ‘our people are innovative and this company values and rewards innovation so that you, the consumer, gets the most latest and best product and service’!

Kanter (2013) refers to innovation as the Holy Grail, bringing to the readers’ attention that there is little evidence of it being embraced in practice. In reality it is often kept under the surface and thwarted from succeeding by management principles and a culture that doesn’t nurture new ideas. These include (based on Kanter 2013, Smarteroffice 2015, Crawford 2013, Merrett 2015):

- ✿ Being sceptical of new ideas - so it becomes too hard for employees, especially at grass roots, to raise them up.
- ✿ Getting stuck in the past – citing history and reasons why an idea didn’t work before. Failing to look at an old idea through different lens or with different people.
- ✿ Keeping people busy and giving them more work during quiet periods – so there’s no room for creative thinking and staff are too tired to think anyway.
- ✿ Promoting cutthroat competition – so people stay safe, focus on achieving predictable targets and the creative thinkers feel left out in the cold, undervalued and jaded. Innovation and creativity actually give businesses and organisations a competitive edge!
- ✿ Counting everything... and often, eliminate any slack and stick to exact plans: “efficiency, scale and low variance” reminiscent of industrial age production-line efficiency.
- ✿ Limiting discussions to a few until the new plan is perfected - so people are reluctant to ask questions or make suggestions, and are unlikely to take on a change they don’t connect with.
- ✿ Punishing failure – when others see failure being punished they shut down, even ostracise the one who tried. They’re unlikely to put ideas forward for fear of failure... and punishment.
- ✿ Blame problems on incompetent employees rather than on the system, on reasons outside of people’s control or even on your own leadership.
- ✿ Be the hero and only promote your own ideas - you got to the top because you know everything there is to know already!

Interestingly, in relation to the last point, one of the factors that can stifle innovation is the leader’s sense of increasing levels of personal power. This can cause otherwise great leaders to overestimate their ability to make good decisions and subsequently fail to invite critique of their work and decisions (News by Marshall 2012). A facilitator who is external to the organisation and neutral about the outcome can increase engagement, enlightenment and insight.



The mantra across many industries is innovation. Individuals and teams are encouraged to be innovative to maintain competitive edge and succeed into the future. Yet opportunities for innovation are not highly evident and efforts to innovate can be seen as rogue behaviour, as a problem employee who's not focused on the job and is distracting other employees. Innovation and creativity requires tough questions, taking risks and sharing experiences, perspectives, opinions and rudimentary thoughts that require an element of boldness to declare.

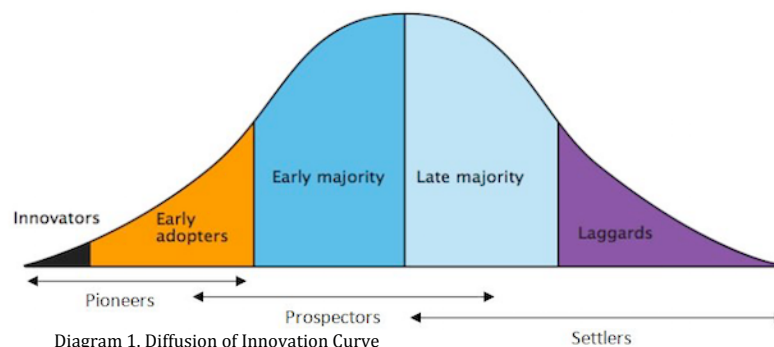


Innovation requires people to draw on their intuition and imagination. To honour one's intuition and imagination they have to be given a voice. One can't tap into their creative juices and then simply expect innovation to happen without sharing concepts however bizarre and rudimentary they seem, without testing and refining an idea, without taking risks or trusting an inkling (Jones 2013). People definitely cannot be innovative in cultures of fear of repercussion or reprimand; it requires a culture of trust and support. Research shows that workplace culture

impacts on innovation and success by up to 70% (Kaplan 2013, Grant Halvorson 2015). It's the unspoken aspects, "values, norms, unconscious messages and subtle behaviours" (Kaplan 2013), that can be the greatest barrier!

A learning organisation has tolerance for failure, which frees people up to be innovative and feel safe to experiment (IT Business Edge 2015). However, many leaders find chaos difficult to bear (McKeown 2014) and feel it shows them up as ineffective managers. To nurture growth leaders have to be able to accept some failure and be open about it (Kanter 2013, Grant Halvorson 2015). Some leaders lack the patience for innovation to evolve and mature to success, resulting in under-utilised human capital, employee disillusionment and disengagement (Govindarajan & Desai 2013).

What's needed is a combination of courage, tenacity and patience, a concept that's supported by the diffusion of innovation theory developed in the early 60's by Everett Rogers. Rogers (2003) discovered that some new ideas take off instantly while others are slow to succeed. And individuals take on innovations at a different pace: a small few come up with the ideas in the first place, the innovators; others are referred to as early adopters, early and late majority and laggards (see diagram 1) based on how long it takes them to adopt a new idea.



Rogers (2003) identified a number of factors that influence the rate of adoption the three main factors being advantage, compatibility and complexity. If there's significant advantage over the existing product, service or way, *and* it's relatively compatible with the environment *and* it is not too difficult to learn it is likely to be successful. If the idea is complex, risky and necessitates adaption to the environment but offers a huge advantage to the user, it is also likely to succeed. On the other hand, a complex idea that has little advantage, even though it's easy to learn will fail to catch on.



An innovative organisation and service requires people to come together, have open dialogue and brainstorm, to feel safe and relaxed so they can think. In Google's '20 per cent' program employees get to work on their own projects for 20% of their time (Jones 2013), leading to some innovative creations. Most leadership and management jobs seek innovation and creativity, however, "the excessive focus on analysis, targets and number crunching, and the absence of introspection and imagination has resulted in a crisis in management which is partly to blame for our current financial crisis." (Mintzenberg 2009). Statistics and data-driven organisations fail to tap into what people think or to respect them for arguing their opinion. Such open thinking and debating opinions could lead to the next great innovation (Jones 2013), even good stress; 'eustress' (Grant Halvorson 2015).

Neuroscience and Innovation

Creativity enables whole brain thinking and innovation, important functions of human development and survival; we've been doing this since the Stone Age and it's enabled us to survive and dominate (Crawford 2013). If we don't exercise our creative, innovative brain we fall into known patterns some of which "may have limited utility or are outmoded" (Crawford 2013). The creative brain must be actively exercised as our primitive brains tend to see changes as threats, causing 'Amygdala hijacking' (i.e. fight, flight or fright) and 'predictably irrational' behaviours (Crawford 2013).

Research at University of Technology Sydney (UTS, Merrett 2015) indicates that busy leaders with little time to process large amounts of information experience 'fragmented mind' that puts them into survival mode. This closes their mind to new possibilities and their unconscious brain reverts to familiar patterns. What the research is showing is that knowledge and information are necessary but the brain needs to take regular breaks from this stress to allow the unconscious parts of the brain to process and come up with 'aha' moments (Canter and Stratford in Merrett 2015). This explains why we often experience the 'aha' when we are least thinking about the problem, some time later, like 2am! The researches attribute this to the brain being in an optimal state where you are relaxed, calm, and alpha brain waves are triggered. Dr Stratford (in Merrett 2015) states that this is when the cortex is functioning at its best so we come up with an innovative solution to the problem.

Employee behaviour in organisations is impacted by the culture – whether it's a culture that triggers dopamine through rewards or serotonin through punishment that triggers the brain's aversive system (Mobbs & McFarland 2010). If it's the latter, employees will be less motivated and less capable of taking risks or to innovate because they are experiencing emotional threat and amygdala hijacking. In organisations that have a culture of growth (belief in limitless potential and ability to improve, Grant Halvorson 2015) employees tend to be more innovative, work collaboratively and show increased effectiveness. In the opposite, a 'genius culture', people tend to break rules and cheat to achieve desired outcomes, and definitely don't share – hardly the ingredients for innovation. You've heard the saying "culture eats strategy for breakfast"!

So what can you do to help innovation to surface and succeed?

1 Enable the voice of your employees at every level.

Innovative employees need places to voice ideas and share concepts. Meetings that encourage everyone to speak up through open discussion, round robin, small group or pairing up is essential. Facilitate meetings to allow everyone opportunities to share ideas regardless of the position or power they hold in the organisation.

2 Create innovative spaces and unstructured time.

Allow staff time to play around with ideas and to work on something that interests them rather than the routine tasks. This may take a bit of creative human resource allocation and rostering e.g. rather than deploy staff or direct them to take leave during quiet times, put them to work on their ideas. Stock the space with creative materials, flipchart paper and coloured pens, innovative cards and pictures, and most of all freedom!



3 Engage in imagining and visioning what's possible

Invite people to imagine what's possible now and in the future and stretch their imagination by asking 'what if...' when planning or reviewing services and products. Imagine what it's like for the user or consumer, what changes would they like to make their experience even better. Empathic observations and mapping can help.

4 Unleash the 'intrapreneurs' in your organisation

Sometimes organisations go outside seeking innovation while they may have the most entrepreneurial person in their midst waiting to be discovered. This is also good for staff satisfaction, engagement and retention; if staff feel their ideas are stifled they are likely to look for somewhere that they can grow and flourish.

5 Increase the expectation that innovation happens

Regularly asking staff about new ideas can make innovation an expectation rather than an exception to the rule. When incidents occur or targets are not being met lead a critical discussion that is open to 'out of the box' suggestions. Limit measuring to one or two relevant things and allow creativity here too – use stories and experiences as well as metrics - be careful about setting expectations that focus on over-measuring;

6 Guide individuals and teams to safely navigate the innovative process

Give people just enough guidance and structure to cope with uncertainty and to tap into creativity. Even if the manager has good tolerance for failure, potentially promising employees can be put off by an early flop. And don't let past failures get in the way of trying again; look at the same idea through different lens and listen to someone else's thoughts on what's possible. Time changes everything!

7 Instil a sense of trust and support

Send a strong message to staff that risk taking in the name of innovative products and services is supported...and recognised. Be curious about what's possible and what others have to offer. Regular catch-ups to check in on what's happening can avert problems early, but build in capacity to absorb some inevitable failures. No use asking for innovation and then punishing failures!

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