

Building an Innovation Mindset

BY JEFF GASPERSZ

The prime source of the innovation power in any firm lies in the mind of its employees. When they are mentally prepared for discovering and realising new opportunities, the organisation will possess an enduring capacity to innovate. Below, Jeff Gaspersz highlights the small initiatives managers can take with a profound impact on developing an innovation mindset.

How Paul Discovers Opportunities

I have a ninety-year-old colleague, Paul, still teaching at our university with a vibrant energy. After earning his PhD at the age of seventy-nine, he took flying lessons, followed many courses, wrote ten books and numerous articles. He established a new magazine and writes a weekly blog. Paul belongs to a group of extraordinary people with a mindset aimed at continuously discovering and realising new possibilities.

When I asked Paul for his secret, he revealed that it consisted of two daily questions that prepared him for discovery. He has asked himself these questions for most of his life. His first question is: what have I learned today? His second question is: what can I improve tomorrow? Each evening he writes his answers to both questions in a small notebook.

This daily ritual changed his perception. Paul wants to continue to learn and improve until the very end of his life. With these two questions, he has developed a way of approaching everyday life as a meaningful universe where possibilities and opportunities for learning and improving abound. It is the same phenomenon that occurs when we have bought a car of a certain brand, in the colour of our choice. Suddenly we begin to notice exactly the same car on many roads.



A Monthly Question

We can apply Paul's mindset to a business context to spot innovation opportunities. Suppose a manager of a sales team asks his employees monthly: what issues or topics have arisen during your conversations with customers that might indicate an opportunity? The effect of this repeated question is that team members will become more attentive, and when visiting customers, will listen more carefully. Each month they are asked to share what is worthwhile, so when speaking with clients they will notice opportunities, unarticulated needs or complaints. As with our earlier example of a new car,

the team will then begin to identify possibilities everywhere.

Questions are thus a simple and effective way to build a state of mind open to change and innovation. When we ask team members, "what can be the hidden opportunity in this customer complaint?", we invite them to explore it further with an open mind. It is then crucial that management allow the necessary time to reflect, and to act upon the answers.

What else can we do to create the desired attitude in a company with an appetite for innovation? Of course, a mindset in an organisation cannot be changed overnight. But we can arrange the right incentives and

atmosphere to gradually shape a mindset focused on innovation. We will mention three important lines of action below.

Bringing in Outsiders with Solutions

An organisation with a desire to innovate has to bring in new voices from outside. These could be managers or professionals from other companies that may have found solutions to comparable problems with which our own organisation is struggling.

Using this method, the Rotterdam Eye Hospital in the Netherlands learned about the reservation system used by the Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM). KLM logistic experts then worked with professionals from the hospital to improve their patient planning and booking system, leading to a reduction in patient waiting times from an average of twelve to four weeks.¹

We can expect a double harvest from innovation-oriented dialogues with individuals from other sectors. Firstly, we are introduced to new, unexpected ideas and ways of thinking that can be applied in our own company setting. The second harvest might be even more profound: dialogue with external creative talents challenges our employees and exposes the limitations of their own experience and thought patterns. The broadening of their views can then be fruitful in many areas.

Encouraging Collaboration and Creative Tension

Let us suppose that a manager gives a small notebook to all team members with instructions to carry it at all times in order to record ideas as they occur. Each week the team is invited to share their recorded ideas relating to improvement and innovation. When a good idea is brought forward, a small ad hoc project group is

set up for further investigation of the idea. This group is deliberately composed of a mixture of individuals from the manager's own team together with members of other teams or departments and they are to consider the chosen idea alongside their regular work tasks. After two months, the project group will present their results to the management.

Many positive outcomes can arise from this simple action. Managers frequently advocate the importance of innovation, yet fail to integrate it into the work agenda. By taking action on good ideas, the leadership shows its appreciation of employee participation and the matter of innovation becomes a priority. Moreover, respect for the creativity of employees stimulates a feeling of community and helps make the company a more attractive place to work.

An additional effect is that innovation-oriented collaboration across units is encouraged. People learn from one another and connect their insights. Informal networks are formed, creating even more opportunities for future collaborations. Furthermore, we introduce creative tension that is crucial for companies striving to innovate. Project groups will work hard to enhance their original idea and meet the deadline, while gaining a chance for recognition of their creative work. There may be some conflicting opinions as a result of diverse backgrounds and experience within the group, but that contributes to the creative tension necessary to increase alertness and productivity and to improve an idea.

Finally, the most valuable and long-lasting effect is that we have focused the minds of employees on innovation and showed them that they can contribute either on an individual basis, or by working together with colleagues from other departments - or even from other companies - in an open and informal way. Giving people time to explore new opportunities, sharing the results and celebrating the successes then creates a positive

reinforcing effect on the willingness of employees to participate in future innovation projects.

Repeated cooperation and co-creation across units in innovation projects, possibly with the involvement of customers, has a profound impact upon the innovation mindset. Employees enjoy the experience of being part of an exciting and inspiring community. This is exactly why organisations like Google are idea factories. They have taken away the barriers to innovation-focused collaboration. Chairman Eric Schmidt explains in an interview: "One of the things that we've tried very hard to avoid at Google is the sort of divisional structure and the business unit structure that prevents collaboration between teams."²

It is the core task of leadership to eliminate the barriers that might prevent collaboration and then ignite the desire to connect and cross-fertilise ideas.

Stimulating Creative Habits

In many firms there is a deep need for creative thinking. Not only to develop new products or services but also to discover new sources of revenue. We know that in order to find smart solutions we have to think differently - both from our competitors and from what previous experiences have often taught us. What made us successful in the past will not necessarily do so in the future, and this realisation triggers us to think creatively and focus on innovation.

When searching for ways to enhance creative thinking we often rely on brainstorming or lateral thinking techniques. These are, of course, important in helping to break old patterns and guide us to new avenues of thinking. However, the problem with these techniques is that they hardly influence our daily thinking patterns. They remain techniques we occasionally use but they do not become part of our second creative nature.

Studies of highly creative people show that these talents use hardly any

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artificial techniques to boost their creativity.³ The secrets behind their creative genius are certain habits they have acquired. We will discuss some of these habits.

When the great physicist Albert Einstein was asked how he differed from the average person, he gave a surprising answer. He said that when people were asked to find a needle in a haystack, most people were glad when they found the needle and immediately stopped searching. "But I," said Einstein, "I always wonder if there might be more needles hidden in the haystack and keep on seeking for them." Einstein was pointing to a golden creativity-boosting habit: stay curious and never stop the search for new insights, perspectives, and solutions. Or in other words: fight mental laziness and the inclination to habitually stick to old and familiar solutions.

A manager I recently met shared with me his solution to resist such a lazy mental attitude in his team. When his employees come to him with a problem, he will only listen if they bring two solutions they have thought up themselves. That creates the right habit!

Also, posing artificial barriers can stimulate the right habits for creativity. When an employee proposes a good idea, we can create such a hurdle by saying: we will only take it into consideration if you redesign your idea and come up with a forty per cent cheaper version. By constantly challenging the inventiveness of our personnel, we build the right mindset, prepared for innovation.

Another creative habit to acquire is to examine problems from different angles. Looking at current products and services from the eye of the customer can bring new ideas for improvements. A CEO asked his employees: what would you do differently if you could lead this company? This invitation to look at problems from the perspective of the boardroom brought not only new answers but also a deeper understanding

of the leadership decisions in that organisation. We often forget that when we ask people to change, we also ask them to change perceptions and see the possibilities of the transformation. We can build an organisation ready for any change when we encourage employees, when faced with problems, to challenge their assumptions and shift their perspectives.

Challenges for the Leadership

In some companies I have worked with as a consultant, I noticed that the real hurdle for innovation was not the mindset of employees but that of the managers. People on the work floor had many ideas but they noticed that the leaders hardly listened to them or that their ideas were crushed in the first instance with the simple argument that there was no time for them at this moment.

If managers really want to cultivate an innovation mindset within the company, they have to welcome new ideas and reward the innovation-oriented behaviour they would like to see, even if this does not lead to the desired results. A company where people like to contribute with their creative thinking is always a place with a tolerance for failure. When management demonstrates that a failure in innovation is just a valuable feedback to learning, the company becomes a safe place to experiment. Soichiro Honda, the founder of the Japanese Honda Motor Company, phrased it as follows: "Success can only be achieved through repeated failure and introspection. Success represents the one per cent of your work that results from the ninety-nine per cent that is called failure."⁴

With innovation rising on the boardroom agenda, the ultimate challenge of leadership is to create a mindset and a culture in the company where innovation is not seen as something extraordinary that can only occasionally occur. The desired culture is where all

members of the organisation embrace innovation and consider it their task to contribute with their connected creativity and entrepreneurship in the search for new possibilities. Possibilities to improve, to find new revenue models, to speed up the commercialisation of selected ideas. With a collective mindset that is ready for these challenges, the organisation will possess a daily sustainable innovation strength with which it can effectively respond to any changes in a pro-active way.

In this article I have outlined ways in which to ignite an innovation mindset in a company, and these should be taken as pointers in the search for one's own initiatives. Building an innovation mindset is always a gradual and tailor-made process; but when we succeed we will have a workforce capable of generating a sustainable competitive power through innovation! 

About the Author



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