

The Leadership That Facilitates Innovation

BY MATTHEW D.M. WATSON

The days of process management are fading away, and the age of innovation is upon us. Work tasks that can be standardized are finding themselves automated by machines or outsourced to foreign entities. This is ushering in the era of knowledge creation, where an organization's goal is to discover how

to find and take advantage of new value in the market. Maintaining the status quo is becoming easier with cheaper methods to execute repeatable processes; the emphasis has shifted to continuous growth. Executive leadership teams now realize how critical an investment it is to enable team creativity.

Become the catalyst that encourages your team to spark new ideas.



This shift has uncovered two significant challenges for the modern leader. The first is that teams are needed in the creative process because of the expanded breadth of knowledge required to understand the complexity of modern organizational problems and solutions. Unfortunately, research shows that groups routinely underperform individuals in creative performance. While it is perceived that teams are more innovative, groups inhibit creative ideas instead of stimulating idea generation, because individuals tend to fixate on how they are being perceived in the group versus focusing on unique ideas.

The second leadership challenge is that the historical practices for running an effective organization run counter to creating an innovative environment. Management is about bringing order and structure, while creativity is often about breaking out of what already is to explore what could be. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi captured the traits of innovative people, finding that these individuals are highly energetic, challenging, and playful. Creative people's realities are rooted in fantasy. They are highly independent, curious, and divergent thinkers open to new ideas. Most management practices have focused on bringing clarity, order, and alignment to an organization; an open-minded, creative mentality can run counter to this approach.

Reversing the innovation and management paradox is not found in a new structure or new organizational architecture. Rather, what successfully affects invigorating creativity in an organization is found in adopting a different mindset toward organizational leadership. Facilitating innovation with your team puts the focus on creating the optimal working environment for experts to succeed in managing their areas of specialty.

Imagine an organization broken into four intertwined quadrants: culture, process, team dynamics, and facilitative leadership. Each of these areas is critical

in its own regard yet uniquely contributes to each of the other three areas. Leadership extends into all these domains, in that managers ceding control and giving empowerment and authority to the most knowledgeable enables team creativity. A shift of this nature is the cornerstone of innovation enablement.

Facilitative leadership for innovation

In the context of innovation and generating creative ideas, you, as the leader, are the catalyst for creative success. Encouraging leadership can inspire just as quickly as pessimistic leadership can mute risky initiatives. Your role in the innovation space is to guide people into sharing their insights, exploring things in ways that may be new or even uncomfortable, and generating ideas far beyond what would have typically come from a usual conversation.

Being innovative and creating out of nothing requires an individual to have the freedom to experiment and

explore. In innovation management, leaders do well for their teams when they award autonomy and remain judgment-free during the creative process. As creators refine their process for how they innovate, facilitative leaders must encourage this behavior instead of fixating on the abnormal deviations. This empowers the creator to concentrate on ideas instead of focusing on not getting reprimanded.

For example, artist Rayce Bird routinely runs wind sprints during design breaks to reinvigorate the cardiovascular system, which he believes opens the flow of creative ideas. The typical management reaction would be to stop the running and to have a crucial conversation on how bad the optics of exercising in the middle of work are. Yet, to build that creative environment, you must encourage that behavior. In fact, join an employee the next time he does an atypical activity and then start a dialogue on how it did or didn't work for you and what to try next time.

Framework for Team Innovation

The innovation environment model is a framework designed to help understand the various dynamics involved with organizational creativity. The model consists of 66 common strategies for enabling innovation in four interconnected areas: culture, process, team dynamics, and leadership.

- **Culture** refers to the organizational values, norms, and conditions that encompass work life. Examples include the rewarding of risk taking, the reduction of organizational bureaucracy, and the encouragement of continuous learning.
- **Process** focuses on how solutions and unique ideas are generated in day-to-day activities and during specifically designed workshops. Examples include conducting thought experiments, applying multiple perspectives, and producing a quantity of ideas.
- **Team dynamics** evaluates how the larger groups leverage others' perspectives and their ability to establish unique domain connections that lead to creation. Examples include achieving cognitive diversity, balanced participation, and debating ideas.
- **Leadership** focuses on formal and informal behaviors exhibited and the conditions created for innovation. Examples include giving mutual respect, providing vision, and encouraging curiosity.

Autonomy is associated with releasing control to explore ambiguity. Shift the focus from hitting the deadline to encouraging your team to be curious and to explore beyond the surface level. Doing so enables the innovators to delve into their deep and focused work, which breeds creation. The shallow work that resides in an organization's structured norms results in benchmarking competitors and maintaining the status quo. The deep work that explores ambiguous relationships, social connections, and complexities leads to the market shifting disruptive innovation.

Take a quick self-assessment on how you made decisions during the past year. If your focus has drifted too far into execution, build exploratory checkpoints into your goals with plans to temper decisiveness. Before you make decisions, have your team propose at least three alternative solutions with the intent to find those hidden connections and opportunities.

Bring problems to your team, not solutions. When you convey preconceived solutions to your employees, you close the door on their insights and change their role from the innovators to the implementers. I've worked with numerous clients that would insist on conducting closed-door strategic planning sessions with the intent to not include their team until they were ready to reveal their grand vision to the organization later. In the end, during these events, my clients would routinely complain that their people weren't creative and had a limited vision. The fallacy in each of their comments was that they had never given their teams a chance to be innovative. Their work model was to wait for the executive-level solutions and then execute.

To see if you've fallen into that trap, reflect on how you conduct strategic planning sessions. Next, consider the issues that have risen during the past few months and count the solutions that you pre-decided or that your team identified. If the realization shocks you, focus your efforts on bringing your team problems and

stepping back into a coaching role where you provide perspective instead of direction. This will not only engage your team into the process but also start to leverage the whole organization's brainpower.

The last emphasis is to encourage creativity and be patient enough to let it develop. Not every gamble or initiative will pay off. Venture capitalists know this well: They will bet on 10 companies,

expecting that nine will fail, happy to see just one of them make it big enough to cover all the other investments. Few investors believe that success comes without a tolerance for failure.

Pfizer went through this same process in the early 1990s during its quest to create a high blood pressure and chest pain medication. As the trials proved to be unsuccessful, the product became close to being shelved—but results indicated that the medication could address erectile dysfunction. This patience resulted in a dramatic market shift from the original vision and a 20-year, \$32 billion revenue run for Viagra. While the intent was specific in the beginning, the innovation cycle is never a straight path. Likewise, never does it end exactly as predicted. Maintaining patience to see things through to the outcome can pay huge dividends.

The creative process

Your role as a leader is changing from complexity manager to expert enabler. Encouraging innovative thought, while difficult, provides long-term organizational success. Changing specific actions to shape your approach to leadership can make significant gains in building an innovative team. These actions begin with how you lead.

Award autonomy so team members can develop self-mastery. Encourage employees to explore other opportunities before they make decisions. Give the organization a chance to be creative by presenting staff with problems without fixed solutions. Lastly, be patient with your employees as they evolve through this process. History's most treasured inventions and ideas of significance were never developed with the highest level of efficiency. The creative process is an exploration that is messy, wasteful, and time-consuming, but it's also the difference between being average and extraordinary.

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