

Culture of Innovation

20 Characteristics of Innovation Culture

From Creativity to Innovation

A Five Step Process to Promote Innovation

Innovation Culture Makes Innovative People

Are you prepared for success?

All leading companies face a stark choice: either try to catch up with change, or lead the change. Leadership is not certain. In fact, more often than not, leadership is fleeting. Kodak, Blackberry and Nokia are three recent examples.

If your organization is not innovating and creating the trend that shapes the environment, you play catch-up and struggle to cope with the side effects of changes created and led by your competitors. If you are not leading the next disruptive innovation, chances are that your organization will be the one left behind.

Below you will find the 20 characteristics of the Innovation Culture. Many of these characteristics can be observed in the strategic innovation of leading companies.

The jury is in. Behavioral predispositions are not as predictive of innovation breakthrough as are the environment, the culture and what's celebrated by the organization. You need your best inventors and most creative people working on your greatest opportunities. But even more critical are the environment and the innovation culture you cultivate.

I've recently had the privilege of working on a strategic innovation project with a team of brilliant and creative individuals. They can easily be described as the Olympic champions of innovation in their field. Each was brilliantly creative in his or her own unique way.

Here is the point. We all have behavioral dispositions toward competence or leadership, but they may not indicate who will surface first with the next breakthrough idea. Innovators come in all shapes, styles and forms. In this team of innovation champions, there were introverts and extroverts; soft-spoken people and loud impossible-to-ignore speakers; reclusive and conversationalist innovators. I am convinced that **you can find innovators with all thinking styles and behavioral dispositions.**

What the research shows is that the environment, the process design and the nurturing of open access promote creativity, exploration and innovation.

In the Zone

Great teams encourage and stimulate innovation. If you have had the experience of working and collaborating with a team "in the zone" and "with the flow," you know there is nothing else like it. Simply put, it makes us all greater than we are each on our own. The engagement stimulates the best in us. We enjoy the adventure of creating and contributing together, and the process energizes us to rally to the task.

Peak "in-the-zone" experiences of working with an energized team leave an indelible memory and knowledge of how innovative, resourceful and capable we can be, even in the face of challenges and setbacks, not to mention opportunities.

A powerful team that cultivates a culture of innovation can be the difference between being in or out of business.

Culture of Innovation - An Anatomy

Here are 20 characteristics of an innovation culture. You can use these to evaluate your organization. Assess these 20 behaviors to identify strengths and opportunity gaps in the innovation culture as it applies to your organization. Rate each of the statements below on the scale from (1) to (5) - (5) representing "very much so" or "always" and (1) representing "hardly" or "never".

You also can ask your team members to score the list and use it to promote a conversation. The statements below represent an ideal situation. They are deliberately written generically. Do not be put off by this. It is meant to offer opportunity for evaluation against an idealized situation of best-in-class innovation teams.

The Innovation Culture Characteristics:

1. **Passion** - We are passionate about solving problems.
2. **Discipline** - We follow a disciplined process to harness creativity.
3. **Risk taking** - We go beyond the comfort zone, take risks and step up to new opportunities and challenges.
4. **Humor** - We enjoy surprises, playfulness and a good laugh.
5. **Diversity** - We include diverse disciplines, talents and viewpoints.
6. **Curiosity** - We actively explore our environment, venture into other fields and probe new possibilities.
7. **Collaboration** - We cultivate open communication, synergy and collaboration.
8. **Courage** - We challenge the status quo and are ready to challenge assumptions and question authority.

9. **Trust** - We cultivate mutual trust and respect.
10. **Beauty** - We are fanatical about design, elegance and beauty.
11. **Energy** – We enjoy and are energized by our work together.
12. **Prototyping** - We quickly translate ideas into prototypes to learn and to iterate.
13. **Boldness & Humility** - We encourage each other to be free of the good opinion of others with boldness, humility and honesty.
14. **Sticking-to-itness** - We persevere, follow through with tenacity and execute to get results.
15. **Inspiration** - We honor the sense of awe and wonder, and encourage new ideas and inspiration.
16. **Resilience** - We celebrate the learning that failures bring and turn setbacks into bouncing-forward opportunities.
17. **Zero gravity thinking** - We encourage free thinking outside and inside the box.
18. **Big Dreams** - We promote big, audacious scenarios and see possibilities within the seemingly impossible.
19. **Kaleidoscoping** - We make new connections, recognize patterns and relationships and identify organizing principles.
20. **Empowered** - We are empowered to make things happen.

You can evaluate your team and get your innovation score.

Here are a few questions for reflection when you debrief your score and in your conversations with your team:

1. Which of the characteristics above got the highest score? What can we learn from these?
2. Where are the lowest scores? What can we learn from these?
3. If these 20 innovation culture behaviors are muscles, which three muscles do you need to exercise and strengthen this month to take your culture of innovation to the next level?

Revisit the 20 characteristics and behaviors regularly to identify improvement and development opportunities and to unleash the innovation power of your organization.

Cultivate the innovation culture. Unleash the innovative power of your team. Build new futures for you and your clients.

A Five Step Process to Promote Innovation

Note: These five steps are nonlinear. They happen in a variety of ways and orders. Use these freely and creatively according to situational need.

1. **Observe mindfully**

Look first to discover and define the issue/subject/problem/process of focus, which represents the need to innovate. In some situations you will begin to mindfully observe anything that captures your attention. Observing mindfully is often the first step of creativity. Creative people look at the same scenery as everyone else and see something different. They look at the same data and see patterns others miss. Dr. Rene Laennec's stimulus for inventing the stethoscope was watching children send signals to each other by tapping on the ends of a log. The famous architect Frank Gehry once created a building based on seeing a photograph of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing. Build a habit of observing mindfully to seek new connections. A new connection can jumpstart the creative process leading to innovation. Look for connections between ideas and connections between ideas to objects and processes. You'll develop the "muscle for making new connections" and more opportunities to make new connections will present themselves to you.

2. **Engage the creativity impulse**

Activate the desire to make new connections and discover unexpected relationships. Get in touch with the drive to solve problems and to promote progress for the betterment of situations and people. Identify the need that fires your motivating passion. What is your drive? It may be an internal desire to bring change, or to create a new solution. It may be an external need to get the job, to gain recognition, to create a legacy. Engage that impulse: whatever frees you up and gets you going. Intense desire is a propelling power, the creative force that drives innovation. Develop a passion to solve, to create value, to innovate.

3. Ask new questions

Redefine the problem and reframe the issue by asking new questions. A new question opens a new door and points in a new direction. Asking the right question is more than half of the solution. Develop a habit of looking at problems as challenges and opportunities. **Ask:** what is a different, new way to look at this? What new opportunities will this bring to us? What new ideas can we combine here? How can we turn this problem upside down and see it from a new perspective?

The **Foster-Miller** Company is a highly innovative organization. They begin each project with the question: "What are we really trying to do?" For example, instead of saying, "We need a new syringe," they ask, "What do we need to introduce a drug below the skin?"

Look at a problem and ask: Where and in what fields have we seen solutions and technology that can be applied here? Look at everything around you with new eyes. Put yourself in someone else's shoes. What would their perspective be? Apply "zero-gravity thinking." **Ask:** How would a child look at this picture? What would a visitor from another planet see in this? What new connections can be made here? Do not censure ideas. Use your full toolbox:

- Draw pictures
- Use analogies
- Create imageries
- Employ metaphors and symbols
- Make a concepts mind-map
- Create an idea tree
- Reverse sentences to reframe and hear them differently
- Create new scenarios

4. Percolate and incubate

The creativity "muscle" needs to be developed. Like any muscle it needs practice and it needs rest. Schedule specific time and use it for reflection and rest. When resting, you percolate and incubate by allowing a non-linear and non-focused process. You let impressions and seemingly unrelated ideas seep

into you. For example, you may be looking at magazines, drinking coffee, staring outside and seeing an elderly woman cross the street; you may be watching a movie; you may be tidying the toolbox in your workshop or you may be cooking or walking in the park. While doing any of these or a dozen other things, another part of your mind is somewhere else, engaged in another process. To percolate and incubate you allow the creative process to shift into the background. You let images and impressions simmer while keeping your mind open. You do not focus in any hard way, rather you let yourself play. As you percolate and incubate, don't censure or discard anything. At some point, an idea, a new a connection will trigger you to follow through with it, to take it to action. Go with the flow, follow the energy.

5. Bring creativity to innovation

Creativity is making new meaningful connections and coming up with new valuable ideas. It is the beginning of the innovative process. For innovation to occur, you need more than a creative idea or insight: the insight must be put into **action**. Take action and you have an opportunity to create new business processes within an organization, and changes in products and services.

Innovation is applying ideas to create valuable results where it matters. It is the transformation that makes ideas "happen". An invention, or using existing tools in new ways, can change how the world works, how people organize themselves, and how they conduct their lives. .To make innovation happen, you have to free up trapped resources. Do your *TE^R*, *terminate and eliminate waste regularly*. Free up resources trapped in non-mission-critical areas, so you can re-invest in innovation.

Practice reacting to ideas with two positive responses for every negative one. It's easier to poke holes in ideas than to figure out how they just might work. Develop the muscle of discovering the beneficial elements, the unique parts that can work, and the possibility that can be opened up. Get this point across to team members, and they'll be much more likely to share their insights and suggestions. By opening your mind and forcing yourself to respond to new ideas with positive comments, you'll stretch out of your comfort zone. At the

acrobatic performance company, **Cirque du Soleil**, there's a sense of ultimate creativity. Every act is a work of collaborative design between the artists and director and coaches, every piece of music is created anew for each act, and every costume is conceived and individually crafted from scratch. With every new show, they create a new masterpiece beginning with a clean slate. No one's creativity is saddled with hand-me-downs or leftovers from the past.

In a broader sense, innovation is a management process and organizational discipline. Novel and useful ideas get adopted into the organizational process leading to new business products, services, or internal processes.

Innovation is a team sport. While one person might come up with a blockbuster idea, in today's organizations it takes the collaboration of many people to successfully implement the idea. One example of collaboration is the group of programmers around the world creating the now familiar computer operating system called **Linux**. A second example for exemplary collaboration is Wikipedia.

At the **Neenan Company**, a Colorado commercial development company, mistakes and "learnings by experience" are so valued that they've placed a giant gong in their lobby which employees hit when they want to tell the rest of the company of their achievements or discoveries. They've even coined a new word "archistructure," which connotes their collaborative effort to bring professionals from design, functionality and budget to work together to create cost-effective solutions that meet client goals. They combine passion for building green and marrying architecture with the art of construction.

Bring creativity to innovation!