

# Innovation: just do it

**C**ontrary to what Apple's famous slogan may suggest, innovation isn't really about thinking differently. It is first and foremost about acting differently, and doing so on a regular basis.

The distinction is critical for leaders who hope to drive innovation in their business. If leaders believe innovation is mostly a mental state, then they tend to focus on "inspiring" and "energising" people, often by way of giving rousing speeches about the importance of innovating or perhaps organising an annual brainstorming workshop.

But these trips to Brainstorm Island have a fundamental flaw. However well organised they are, they overlook the fact that innovation is not a one-off 'let's get an idea' event, but an ongoing process where new, ill-formed notions are gradually transformed into bottom line results. For that to happen, innovation can't be restricted to happening two days a year; it has to be an integrated part of the work we do on the other 363 days as well.

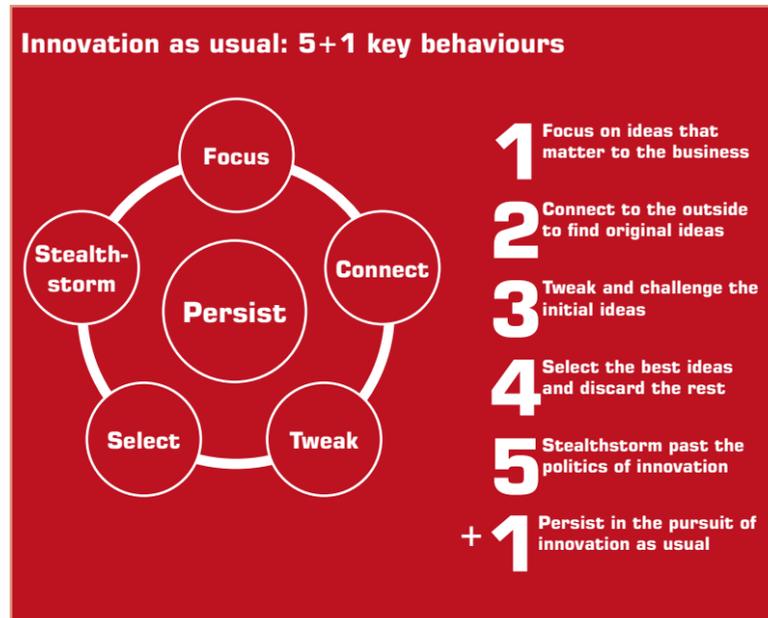
In other words, innovation is something people do, not a mindset, and until our companies start focusing sharply on the behavioural components of innovation, making the concept tangible and operational, the quest for new ideas will be hopelessly mired in abstraction.

In my recent book, *Innovation as Usual: How to Help Your People Bring Great Ideas to Life*, co-authored with my colleague Paddy Miller, we argue that innovation is best understood and approached as a recurring pattern of specific behaviours. Having spent the past seven years studying innovative leaders across a range of companies, countries and industries, we have created a model of '5+1 key behaviours' that innovative leaders embrace, and which you can follow to bring new ideas to life.

## 1. Focus the search

In 2012, we conducted a study at New York's IESE Business School in which we asked 260 executives holding formal innovation roles what the biggest barriers to innovation were. The most frequent answer was the absence of a well-articulated innovation strategy. This confirmed something many other studies have suggested:

Innovation isn't just a way of thinking, but a way of doing things, says THOMAS WEDELL-WEDELLSBORG, who highlights six practical steps to bring only the best new ideas to life



that innovators don't need freedom as much as they need focus. If you give people freedom, you might increase the chances that they get really unusual ideas, but you also vastly increase the risk that people will never get started, or that they will come up with bad ideas. It adds up to ideas that won't benefit your business even if they should be implemented.

Focusing the search for innovation is a core job of the leader. When looking for new ideas, instead of pretending that all ideas are equally valuable, leaders must give people clear guidance as to what kind of idea is most useful to the company.

For instance: What level of results should people aim for? What kind of risk is acceptable? How close to the current business should the idea be? Is there a specific part of the value chain that people tend to overlook in the search for new ideas and which might harbour hidden potential?

From our research across many different industries, we have found that focus tends to beat freedom when it comes to making innovation happen. As an experiment, try being very direct next time you ask people for ideas,

pointing out a specific and clearly defined challenge that you want them to focus on.

## 2. Connect people to new input

Where do good ideas come from? Decades of research has made the answer clear. They come when people are exposed to new input on a continual basis. You don't get good ideas when you sit in the same office day after day, talking to the same people and listening to the same newscasts as everybody else. As a leader, if you hope to generate more good ideas, you need to create an organisation in which people are systematically exposed to new and different inputs as part of what they do.

The systematic element is important. As recent research has shown, people who have lived abroad are more creative than their more sedentary peers, but only if they have done so for a year or more. A quick, one-week tour of Silicon Valley or other innovation hotspots can be inspiring, but if you are looking for results, such brief exposure is not sufficient. It has to be more of an ongoing activity.

The good news is that inspiration can be closer than you think. New input doesn't have to come from the other side of the world to foster new ideas. Often, it can happen when people from different departments interact more. At one company we worked in, the management team witnessed an increased level of innovation and collaboration after introducing a system where people could sign up to have lunch with a new colleague once a week. By finding simple, structural ways of connecting people to new input, leaders can greatly increase the chance that people will come up with more original ideas.

## 3. Tweak new ideas

When people get ideas, they tend to fall in love with them immediately, and while that passion drives them to persist, it also blinds them to the fact that the first incarnation of any great idea is normally imperfect. A key learning point from the related discipline of entrepreneurship, crystallised in the Lean Startup movement, is that first ideas are flawed.

To succeed with a new idea, it is crucial to stage extremely fast, quickly iterated tests, so any erroneous assumptions about the idea can be discovered before a huge investment of time and money has been made. In

## How organisations evaluate ideas

Most popular methods for evaluating ideas	All respondents
There is no standard policy for reviewing and evaluating ideas	45%
There are several different ways a new idea can be reviewed and evaluated	27%
Within the organisation, there is an independent review and evaluation process for ideas	9%
Ideas are reviewed and evaluated by the unit manager in the location where the idea was proposed	7%
The employee is responsible for starting and managing the review process	5%
Ideas are reviewed and evaluated by the unit that would be impacted the most by the idea	5%
Other	2%

Data source: Jay Jamrog, *Innovate or Perish: Building a Culture of Innovation* (Institute for Corporate Productivity, 2011)

firms where leaders are not aware of this dynamic, the long-term planning approach (which works well for regular business) is also applied to innovation, slowing down the development process and making them liable to commit epic failures.

Great ideas aren't found, they are developed. Leaders must create an environment where new ideas are continually challenged and tested, not with the aim of making go/no-go decisions, but with the aim of giving the innovators as much input as possible, allowing them to tweak their ideas and make necessary course corrections.

One company that famously embraces this insight is Pixar, arguably the most successful film studio in the history of Hollywood. At Pixar, the management team has created

simple habits and systems that force people to air their ideas early, such as the 'dailies' review where everybody shares the current state of their work, or the 'brain trust' where film directors struggling with a problem can get expert assistance from their peers. Without such systems, many people will end up sitting in a dark corner and polishing their ideas for ages, never realising they have overlooked a simple problem that a bit of real-world testing would bring to light immediately.

## 4. Engineer the selection process

In 1847, two decades before the scientific discovery of germs, a young Hungarian doctor working in Austria realised that diseases could spread through small particles, transmitted to patients by hospital staff. For that reason, he recommended to his boss, Johann Klein,

that the hospital introduce handwashing. The idea would have saved thousands of lives had Klein not rejected it outright. Because of Klein's failure to recognise a great idea, it would take another 20 years before the medical world introduced antiseptic handwashing for hospital staff, to the death and detriment of countless patients.

The history of innovation is replete with such bad judgment calls. Good ideas surface, only to be killed by what was, in retrospect, an overly biased gatekeeper. The solution is not to focus on the individual gatekeepers as people will always suffer from biases, personal as well as structural. Rather, it is about engineering the decision

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environment in which those judgment calls happen, so individual biases are less likely to throw a good decision.

Google, for instance, uses groups to make hiring decisions, with the explicit reasoning that one individual should not have too much power lest their personal interests and biases makes him or her pick the wrong people. Group decisions aren't appropriate for all types of selection processes, but the essence is that leaders have to think deliberately about how and when selection processes work. And in this respect, many leaders have a lot to do. As a survey from 2011 indicated, 45% of all companies have no standard policy for how ideas are evaluated, effectively exposing them to the same dangers of judgment that Klein suffered from.

## 5. Stealthstorm the politics

Corporate politics has been the bane of many a good idea. For better or worse, innovative employees often have an adversarial relationship to the very idea of networking and organisational politics. They refuse to 'play the game', thinking their good ideas should sell themselves, which is rarely true. No matter the quality of an idea – in fact, especially if the idea is truly original – it is necessary to prepare the ground for that idea, navigating the pitfalls of the modern organisation.

This is where the role of the leader becomes critically important. Many initiatives have succeeded because they did not assume that senior decision makers would fall in love with the idea at first sight. Instead, before going public with the idea, the team worked diligently behind the scenes, creating proof of concept and securing the support of a wide base of stakeholders.

As a leader, you have to help people navigate the organisational landscape, pointing them in the direction of potential sponsors and allies and making them stay off the radar of people who might resist the idea based on local, overly myopic incentives. For any new idea that has to survive the corporate gauntlet, ask: Who are the key stakeholders? What are their incentives to support or resist the idea? Does the innovator have any contacts who already trust him, such as a former boss, who might be good to approach to secure their help? And can these people help secure some extra resources for the idea, so he can generate proof of concept before putting it onto the corporate radar?

### +1. Enable persistence

More than any of the above behaviours, innovation is about fostering persistence. New ideas take time to build, and without the determination to persevere, the inevitable delays and obstacles will end up draining new ideas of their momentum. So what can leaders do to make people persist in the pursuit of a new idea? According to the existing body of research, motivation comes in two fundamental flavours: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is about doing something for its own sake. Extrinsic motivation is when people do an activity to achieve something else.

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Our research has brought up two important levers for thinking about fostering persistence in innovators. First, extrinsic rewards, while not central to innovation, must not be ignored. For innovators, rewards are what the early management scholar Frederick Herzberg called hygiene factors. They are not in themselves motivating, but if they are below a certain threshold, they can have a strong demotivational effect. Simply put, when comparing the rewards and incentives that innovators face, you have to make sure that the innovators are not significantly worse off than people who stick to doing business as usual.

The second learning point pertains to intrinsic motivation. Leaders often use fear-based arguments to explain why people need to change their behaviour. 'Innovate or die' is a popular refrain in CEO speeches. But as we did the research for our book, it was clear most of the innovators we studied weren't driven by fear or other negative drivers; they were driven by a deep sense of personal passion and interest.

For managers, what this means is simple: your chance of fostering persistence is much greater if you allow people to innovate in areas they are already passionate about. Within the constraints of business needs, a good question to ask is: What is an idea that only you can come up with? This aims them at areas in which they already have domain expertise, making them more likely to succeed, and allows them to focus on ideas that hold their personal interest. It is when such ideas surface – at the intersection of company priorities and the interests of the individual employee – that great ideas are born. **HR**

**Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg** is lecturer at IESE Business School in New York and a frequent keynote speaker for corporate audiences. He is the co-author (with Paddy Miller) of *Innovation as Usual: How to Help Your People Bring Great Ideas to Life*, published by Harvard Business Review Press in March 2013. He can be contacted via his website, [www.wedellsblog.com](http://www.wedellsblog.com).