



10 Strategies for Fueling Intentional Innovation

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We tout innovation as the key to individual and organization progress, but we have created a workforce that can only stomach it when success is guaranteed. What stands in the way? Fear. As a result, innovation happens accidentally. Here are the 10 steps for making it happen intentionally:

Step 1. Awaken the impulse to innovate. First we need to generate excitement for innovation. This includes shifting the focus to the opportunities that emerge when we solve problems differently. People literally need permission to innovate.

Step 2. Identify a challenge to get innovated. The best way for people to become innovative thinkers is to introduce a certain challenge or problem that demands innovation. Challenges and problems are easy to identify. Just listen for a complaint or an annoyance. Phrases such as “it’s always done this way” or “That’s just the way it’s done” are indications of areas starved for innovation. Pick one and create a vision for what it could look like if the problem was solved without worrying about how it will be solved.

Step 3. Remove obstacles to innovation. “Obstacles” include people, resources, and time. If other people are sabotaging the innovation efforts, we need to assist in finding a way around them. If people lack resources, help them determine how to leverage current resources, obtain missing ones, or scale back. If time is the obstacle, we need to help them make better time choices. Often people prioritize equally all of their work, causing overwhelm and confusion about which ones have priority. Get clear about obstacles and priorities before expecting people to innovate.

Step 4. Turn the brain upside down. It is human nature to look at problems from only one perspective. We forget that there are many ways to look at a situation or a problem. Focused on one path people fail to see others. If we help shift the way people look at the world, we can shift the way they look at a current challenge. To start thinking on another level, as Albert Einstein once said, we must first distract their attention. Use brain teasers and games like Sudoku to force people to think on a different level, not the automatic, unconscious level that causes each of us to drive to work without thinking and park in the same spot every day.

Step 5. Generate compelling ideas without evaluation. To start people generating fresh, gripping ideas, engage brainwriting. Brainwriting is like brainstorming but without the influences of the herd and groupthink. Because people are very influenced by what others think, they are

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constantly editing their contributions in a brainstorming session if they fear personal rejection for their suggestions.

With brainwriting, people consider a variety of problems and generate ideas individually before they ever share them with the group. Each person in a group is given a piece of paper. At the top they write a challenge with which they are struggling. For example, the problem statements are written as, "How to increase participation in the quarterly sales webinar." Each person then passes their paper to the right. Everyone now has a different page with a new problem at the top. They read the problem statement, and storm their own brains without editing or worrying about *how* their ideas will be implemented. They then write down anywhere on the sheet three ideas to help the owner of the problem solve it. After a few minutes, everyone shifts their pages to the right so the next person has the opportunity to add three new ideas. The only rule is that no idea can be edited or duplicated on the sheet. The sheet continues to rotate around the room until everyone has had a chance to weigh in with some fresh ideas.

No names are attributed to the problem statements or to the ideas, thereby eliminating the innovation-suffocating influences of groupthink. The owner of the problem is handed back the brainwriting sheet with three times as many ideas as are people in the room. The brainwriting sheet demonstrates many different ways to look at potential solutions. The entire exercise forces people to solve problems by thinking on a different level.

Step 6. Evaluate ideas for success and sustainability. Once people have generated a list of ideas, they need to pick a few to evaluate and consider executing. For each idea on the list, examine stickiness or staying power. Determine what resources are required for success. Edward De Bono, a pioneer in the creative problem solving arena, invented the PMI technique for evaluating ideas. For each idea, list pluses, minuses, and interesting points. Perhaps one idea has one plus and many minuses, but we notice that the one plus heavily outweighs the minuses and the minuses can be overcome with some tweaking or other resources. That would be an interesting point.

Step 7. Pitch with passion to a chosen audience. We must know our audience and predict any objections, concerns, and questions that audience may lob. Remind people that an audience's objections and concerns are not questioning them as individuals, just their ideas. It's not personal, although it may feel like it. If chosen carefully, the first audience will be yaysayers and will express their appreciation for their innovation and moxie and respect for their passion and innovative thinking. The audience's comments will be contributions rather than objections that merely block progress. Great first audiences are also committed to innovation, not to status quo.

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Step 8. Watch for naysayers + recruit champions. Keep a keen eye for the naysayer in the crowd who clings to mediocrity and status quo, who wants to bring innovation down. Maintain a focus on recruiting champions and building momentum from there.

Step 9. Implement with unwavering passion. Implementation includes using demonstrations, pilots, tests, focus groups, and incubations. When people use a “pilot,” they can engage in live experiments, while continuing to flush out the idea and prove its viability and marketability.

Step 10. Celebrate and evaluate. At this point regardless of where you are, it’s time to celebrate. Evaluate process and progress, not just ideas. No matter the success, celebrate a commitment to think at a new level. Identify what worked and what didn’t about the process. Inquire what people would do differently next time.

Reinvention is essential for individuals and organizations to stay fresh, enchanted, and committed. Innovation is the only way to reinvent. People are dying to make a difference. They just need to know how. It’s time to strike the match.



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