

# A Template for Harnessing the Power of Innovation

By Preston Ingalls

**T**he famed artist Pablo Picasso once said, “The chief enemy of creativity is good sense.” He certainly nailed that one. By its very nature, creativity and innovation create change, which alters how we do things.

We realize that productivity comes from improved efficiency. We also appreciate that new markets are explored and exploited when we have the vision and will to view and approach them. We know that new methods and refinements come from diverse ways of doing things rather than repeating the same patterns. We also realize problems are solved when we are able to examine them from different perspectives rather than limited ones. All of these are derived from creativity and innovation, by the application of new ideas.

The question we should be asking is, “Why do we have to work so hard to encourage creativity and innovation at the workplace?” I mean, why isn’t it inherent with all our employees? We may not be aware that our own organizational culture suppresses innovation through strict rules that punish risk takers.

While it may be that we just don’t expect our people to innovate, the crux of the problem is more likely that many people just don’t know how. We can learn a lot about practicing innovation from watching a five-year-old child playing or drawing. Because they are developing their cognitive abilities, they are highly inquisitive and ask questions as they try to figure things out.

Why does creativity tend to wane with age? One reason is as we grow older, we know more from our experiences and education. But that could be a double-edged sword that may also lead us to ignore evidence that contradicts what we already believe to be true. We become restricted to looking at things one way, which is reinforced by our comfortability derived from accepting our experience as unchanging fact.

While some studies have shown that the optimal time for creative thinking is between the age of 20 and 25, others show that peak creative thinking where we can create something superior is at the age of 42. But does this mean if you are in your thirties, fifties, or sixties, you are out of luck as far as producing something really innovative? Of course not, especially if you have the right environment.

## THE INNOVATOR’S DOZEN

How do we, as leaders, foster creative thinking and build the right environment? What specific things can we do to get

our team to look at problems and challenges in a new way by seeing opportunities instead of barriers and obstacles? With more than four-and-a-half decades in the industry, I developed the Innovator’s Dozen, which I share below:

**Option It:** Always encourage alternative points of view. Push for options and encourage your team to develop different ways to approach a solution.

**Hire It:** Surround yourself with innovators by hiring the right people. When interviewing and screening, look for people who embrace innovation, show imagination, and possess an inspirational personality that is bold and risk taking rather than reserved. There are personality tests that will help to assess these characteristics and interview questions you can ask.

**Reinforce It:** In direct language and actions, share that innovating is part of the vision or mission of the organization and an expectation of those in the business culture. This is often stated in the vision, mission, or core values but is seldom reinforced through reminders, so it’s good to regularly revisit this important principle.

**Inspire It:** The majority of innovations come from the folks closest to your customers versus senior management, so inspire these people to voice their opinions. Employees don’t park their brains at the door when they come to work. They often see opportunities for improvement but need a forum to voice those, so you have to be willing to listen and apply those suggestions and heed their advice. Sometimes they need a little encouragement, so don’t be afraid to say, “Come on! I know you have an idea.”

**Drive It:** Remember that you are the role model, so they will look to you for leadership and direction. If you want employees to feel secure trying out new ideas in the workplace, let them know it is ok to make mistakes as long as they learn from them. Don’t just share that Edison had many failures before he came up with the incandescent light bulb; share some of your own failures. Be willing to explain your own mistakes and the lessons learned. Innovation takes trial and error, so if you never think creatively with your own work you can’t expect it from your employees.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Ease It:** Employees who've been working 50-plus hours per week for months aren't likely to feel innovative and spry. After all, it is hard to get energy out of a drained battery. Stress is taxing and limiting when trying to look at new ideas, so pick times that are less stressful or find ways to create breaks in prolonged work schedules. Remember, sometimes you have to stop working for the business and start working on the business.

**Capture It:** A good creative exercise is to brainstorm by using a whiteboard or flipchart to review the rules of brainstorming because many people don't know them. You can then conduct a brainstorming session playing one idea off of another.

**Clip It:** This is a good exercise to get people started with brainstorming. You hold up a paper clip and ask, "What are all the ways we could use this paper clip?" Then go around the room, giving each person an opportunity to provide an idea or pass. Once they are fully exhausted of ideas, the session is over. You have just demonstrated a

brainstorming session. Now that they understand how it's done, do a session that can be applied to the business. In this simple training session, be sure to forego evaluation until all ideas are presented.

**Reward It:** What gets rewarded gets repeated, so always reinforce innovation and new ideas through public rewards. This reinforces the behavior and performance you want to continue. The value of the reward is less significant than the timeliness and sincerity.

**Publish It:** The companion of public rewards is publishing the results of good work. In our office, we have a bulletin board in our kitchen where we post accolades and positive emails and rewards for other employees to view. Motivation is not one thing but many things you do to inspire.

**Risk It:** Mistakes provide opportunities for learning and making more-informed decisions in the future, but only if learning occurred. Use errors as a debriefing opportunity to find out

what they would have done otherwise. Ask, "Based on what happened, how would you have approached it differently?" Risk-taking can be beneficial if it comes with lessons learned. We don't want them to fear retribution, but they need to come to the table with "here is what I learned." This is what I will walk away with. That is called "heuristics," which is about acknowledging the lessons from trial and error.

**Value It:** Continuous improvement and refinement should be stated as one of the foundational core values of your organization. Illustrate examples of how continuous improvement has been incorporated throughout the organization—from design, application, and methods. This attitude should be a reinforced value.

## CONCLUSION

By applying these techniques, you can build a more creative environment and solve your organization's challenges by tapping into its largest asset ... the minds of its employees. Go harness the power and find the next light bulb. ■

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