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# Innovation is for leaders

by Gianni Anchois

## Real leaders innovate.

They despise the status quo. They get bored quickly (in a good, constructive way). They are stubborn, single-minded and relentlessly looking for better ways to do things.

So as a leader never be afraid to introduce radical innovations in how things get done. Don't just set off to modify a process.

BS it. Break it. Simplify it.

If you are setting up a team to move it forward, make sure every party is clearly accountable, and give them a chance to make a real difference.

Lead them to build their own playbook, but step out of the process as early as you can. Foster your team's diversity: don't focus on what's different, instead harness the peculiarities of each member to boost the team's creativity.

## **Diversity drives innovation**

It's a known fact that diversity often trumps ability. There are situations in which a group of ordinary people who are diverse can defeat a group of like-minded experts.

Note that what I'm discussing here is cognitive diversity, which is fundamentally different from identity diversity. For example, it's most impactful when dealing with complex tasks, or those requiring creativity and especially innovation.

People with cognitive diversity provide diverse perspectives, by having different ways of representing situations and problems. They categorise and classify things differently, hence providing original interpretations.

They also can come up with different ways of devising solutions to problems. Finally, they can analyse situations in ways that make for stronger and more accurate predictive models.

So this wealth of diversity can definitely create high-performance environments where, for instance, improvements can be built on improvements.

## **Mind the innovation killers**

But how do you know when the time is right to innovate? Well, my take is that too soon is always better than too late.

Ideally, when looking for hard core innovation, you should be ready to break perfectly working models. So basically don't expect to be popular with your colleagues anytime soon!

Also, in your quest make sure innovation is never "strategised". Usually that's what happens at large companies, where the so called "innovation consultants" drop from the sky endorsed by some big gun top manager, and fail to deliver any real, disrupting, game changing innovation.

They can't. They are not equipped for it, principally because they lack the practical sense of the "doers" (i.e. entrepreneurs, intra-preneurs, entre-ployees), but also because it's not in their mandate (i.e. the status quo wants "friendly to them" innovation).

Radical innovators are always slightly on the edge, often looked at with suspicion from other managers, living on the border between acceptable disruption and consciously built chaos. They don't ask for permission, and almost never beg for forgiveness. And to a certain extent they don't need a mandate from the top floor to disrupt things.

### **Innovative leadership**

If you lead with sincerity, honesty, and integrity — the key attributes that define great leaders — you are ideally positioned to drive hard-core innovation.

Your authenticity as a leader, as defined by what others see in you and not as a self-proclaimed trait, will enable your disruptive effort and make it more impactful on the rest of the company.

Leverage your status to pursue radical new business opportunities, exploit new disruptive technologies that will ultimately be changing your core business approach. Make innovation a part of your company's culture.

At the same time, be mindful of the fluctuations of the company's sentiment toward innovation, inevitably followed up by tighter budgets and cut backs to outstanding projects.

After all, innovation is always a risky pursuit, with an uncertain and often distant payoff — no surprise that less able managers will look for quick ways out when the financial performance of the company is below expectations.

Instead, aim at building an ecosystem of like minded individuals, bring in an outside-in perspective and creative talents if needs be. This will give you a stronger foothold when things get tough.

### **Unavoidable innovation**

Finally, try to build your innovation into something that feels unavoidable.

If you manage to do it, people will welcome and embrace your new product, service, process or business model not only quicker but more fully as well.

***“Of course that’s the way it’s built. There’s really no other way!”***

If you hear them say that, you’ll know you’ve done a great job.

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