

Five Tips for Building a Culture of Innovation

- 1) Talent strategy. Leadership hires, mentors, develops, and empowers people for creative thinking and problem-solving across the organization. Succession planning rewards a clear definition of “innovation” competencies. **Tip**: In innovative organizations, development opportunities expand the typical training realm to include cross-training, mentoring, cross-functional project teams, and other creative strategies to cross-pollinate skills and ideas. Find some way to give people exposure to new people and ideas regularly.
- 2) Risk strategy. Risk-taking is rewarded and mistakes are a learning opportunity because there is a *process* for assessing risk and empowering people. The process includes knowing when NOT to empower, and who is ready or not. **Tip**: There’s nothing like giving someone who’s smart and well-trained an “I believe in you” assignment and lots of freedom, to generate creative energy.
- 3) Non-compete strategy. Candid truth-telling is encouraged and expected, and is the bedrock on which trust and cooperation is built – especially among “enemies” who compete for resources. **Tip**: When chartering a new team around innovation – especially involving people from different parts of the globe, instead of focusing on differences, find out what everyone shares in common. This includes the goal they’re pursuing. Even if it is small, it will plant seeds of trust. Don’t overlook team “ground rules.” Differences in style, culture, and approach are more appreciated within a framework of trust.
- 4) Communication strategy. Communication about the vision, mission, and goals is clear, linked to innovation and often repeated. **Tip**: If you are leading an innovation effort, you need a “mission” that describes what innovation is in service of ... that excites people ... and then you need to tie everything people are doing to it: “AOL Anywhere” and “Man on the Moon” are examples of innovation-driven mission statements.
- 5) Measurement. Metrics do not focus only on end results (eg, number of patents). Equally important are “upstream” seedbed activities such as amount of training and development people receive in innovation-related skills, percentage of ideas for improvement that come from employees, etc. **Tip**: Measure how many meetings begin with a clearly defined goal for “innovation.” Just this one small step catalyzes energy.