

## How to Jump-Start Team Innovation: Structure and Process Tips that Support Creativity

The new wave of business profitability will be coming from teams that innovate as a way of life. Here are specific team activities that you can use to diagnose and improve the innovation culture of your team:

- 1. Set innovation-friendly goals.** If your goal is to innovate, define specific innovation goals. It's amazing how few team projects and meetings start with a clear goal. Innovation fails when you over-estimate what people can do within a specific time frame or period. Be specific, be realistic, do smaller chunks.  
A good goal in a meeting should aim toward one of three outcomes:
  - Are we sharing information, perspectives, and creating options?
  - Are we building a recommendation or making a final decision?
  - Are we planning how to execute?
- 2. Utilize multiple perspectives.** Cross-functional teams are popular because they bring diverse points of view, skills and ideas to a project.
  - The different cultures of R&D, Quality, Product Development, Manufacturing, Sales, and Distribution each adds a unique perspective (and a complexity to be managed).
  - Add to this approach by involving members from different geographies when possible.
  - Getting input from customers is not new...but are you making them an integral part of your team's process?
- 3. Provide open access to all information.** Information is power, but only when relevant. If you're like most companies today, collaboration is happening across time zones. To move faster:
  - Set up a wiki, blog, or shared drive so everyone has access to all information. Not only is this more efficient than email, but collaboration can take place more easily.
  - If someone plays the role of moderator or facilitation you'll get more traffic and interaction.

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4. **Ask versus tell.** Asking questions is a significantly under-utilized skill in business; for creating buy-in, building engagement, driving consensus – and is a prerequisite for innovation.
  - If your ideas are half or fully-baked, don't expect much innovation.
  - “What are the 10 possibilities for how we could shrink customer call time” automatically drives possibility, while “Shrink customer call time” seems further out of reach.
  - Take time to develop one quality question and build the meeting around it – the energy boost will amaze you.
  
5. **Go slow to go fast.** With today's frantic pace of business, this seems counter-intuitive. Too many teams jump to solution (“fire, fire, fire”) before having adequate clarity about the real problem (“ready, aim”).
  - Planning, problem solving and design require structure – create a meeting where everyone can participate in a way that is meaningful.
  - The extra time it takes to craft a well-defined problem or clear business case will speed the end result, in contrast to time wasted solving the wrong problem or attempting to execute a plan that doesn't have full buy-in from the right people.
  
6. **Then go faster.** Once a solution is defined, implement a pilot or test quickly and get feedback.
  - The big lesson from industrial design firms is rapid-prototyping: Testing an imperfect first design is better than waiting for the perfect solution.
  - Changes based on feedback during early testing of the product or service allow for a stronger solution.
  - There is *always* a way to work in partnership with customers – be creative.
  
7. **Get more visual and physical.** Too many operation reviews and information meetings live on a steady diet of PowerPoint and talk. Innovation comes from activities that stimulate interesting conversation, movement. Therefore:
  - Stock your meeting rooms with flipcharts, wall maps, colored markers, sticky notes and dots (for dot voting).
  - People moving around and literally getting their fingerprints on the work (rather than one person recording).
  - Ban PowerPoint except for rare presentations. Not only is it a poor innovation tool, it puts people into a trance.

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- 8. Learn about each other.** Trust is a key to getting teams to innovate effectively. Take time to allow people to get to know each other. Quick “relationship” ideas:
- Start the meeting with “One-Words”: Everyone expresses one word for how their week has gone, what they’re feeling like right now, etc.
  - End meetings with “One-Words”: One valuable idea I got today was...
  - Have people share something personal (not private) about themselves, like “My proudest leadership moment...” “The first job I liked was...” etc.
- 9. Use consensus carefully.** Consensus is a very hard thing to do well and is rarely needed (except when you really need buy-in). It requires time to make sure everyone has been heard and understood and may take several meetings.
- Teams do better when they know who and how a decision will be made
  - If buy-in is critical, narrow to options and a chunk size that’s manageable. Reaching consensus on a strategic direction among an executive team could take months. Reaching consensus on two directions based on the strategy team’s research is more realistic.
  - Don’t use consensus as a cop-out for making a hard decision.
- 10. Chaos has a structure.** Whether “disruptive innovation” or “incremental change” you need to make room for people to have meaningful conversation – and it may not always be driving to a hard action plan. But chaos does have structure:
- Plan meetings – good facilitators spend almost as much time planning the interaction with solid process, as the meeting time itself.
  - Go neutral – if you can’t be neutral, find a facilitator who can – someone completely objective about your content and who is trained to notice and manage the group dynamic.

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