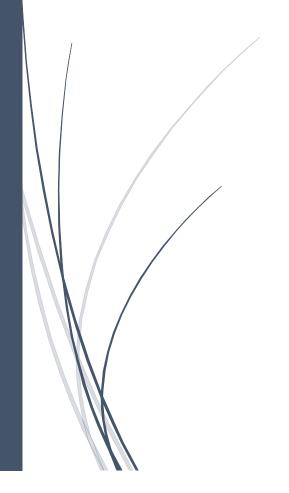8/24/2020

A Guide to Supporting Innovative Practices Within Organizations

Benjamin Gleason, PhD and Tanner Brooks, MA

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Introduction

Public health work is challenging—and while it can be incredibly rewarding, it would be wrong to discount the numerous obstacles that public health workers face. In fact, the challenges that those in public health face (i.e., trying to develop new social norms through changing entrenched human behavior; the use of complicated methods and frameworks in order to achieve rigor and fidelity; coalescing partnerships and coalitions that may have different agendas; building capacity when turnover is common and opportunities for advancement are uncommon) are exacerbated by the current global reality—living and working in a pandemic. Faced with these external motivators, it becomes even more essential to support innovation.

This guide is composed of two parts—Part I provides summaries of relevant and accessible articles that are particularly focused on *how* organizations support innovation. Part II presents case studies of fictitious organizations that are currently facing organizational challenges supporting innovation. After each case study, it may be worthwhile to pause and consider how organizations can "right the ship" to offer a culture more conducive to innovation. For this reason, we have provided guiding questions that may facilitate discussion of the challenges, and solution, at hand.

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Part I: Best Practices to Support a Culture of Innovation

Article 1: Seven Steps to Creating a Culture of Innovation

If asked to envision a creative person immersed in the creative process, you might a imagine a writer madly scribbling notes deep into the night, a paint-speckled artist in front of a canvass pondering just the right brushstroke, an entrepreneur launching an innovative product, or even a child elbow-deep in clay consumed with sculpting the perfect dinosaur. An office cubicle is most likely not the first thing that would come to mind.

We tend to think of creativity as the fickle and free-spirited companion of disorganization—a spontaneous and informal muse at home in open spaces, unstructured surroundings, and the unmanageable jumble of unforced inspiration. This may be true. But creativity and innovation can also be nurtured during the 9 to 5 workday, in a conference room, by people in business casual.

In a new approach to understanding creativity, Harvard Business School's Teresa Amabile looked at what creativity actually is, how it operates, and how it can be fostered at the organizational level. Her seven strategies for creativity offer a checklist for leaders looking to create a culture where ideas flow, demonstrating that creativity can happen in a cubicle or a boardroom when organizations follow key principles.

In analyzing the first strategy, clear goal setting, Amabile discovered a contradictory truth: **"Goals must be clear enough to align team members, and also loose enough that team members have autonomy in how to reach those goals."** Autonomy allows for bringing in new perspectives and merging ideas that nourish creativity. But to accomplish clear goal setting, outcomes need to be tangible, measurable, and clear.

The second strategy proposes that assignments must match the individual's interests and provide a positive challenge. People are motivated when they find their work meaningful, leading to resilience and better feedback that spurs innovation. A key leadership task is to pair work with the people who have both the skill *and* interest for it, making a good fit for the individual to innovate through meaningful work.

The third strategy, open communication systems, enables creativity by catalyzing idea exchange, collaboration, and coordination. **This involves hands-on problem solving rather than traditional operations by formal process and analysis**. Design labs offer an environment that spurs creativity by opening new communication channels and strengthening co-worker relationships.

Applying the fourth strategy means feedback must be frequent, constructive, and supportive. Innovation often happens through a "series of small observations, recombinations of ideas, and mini experiments that give us fast feedback, allowing us to adapt." **The process of feedback and adaptation is part of a larger cycle of designing, building, running, analyzing, and repeating.**

Strategy number five involves offering equitable and generous rewards and recognition, even when the innovative behavior involves risk taking and results aren't immediately positive. This could involve verbally celebrating creative effort during a team meeting, offering raises and promotions for novel ideas and thinking, or giving employees time to follow their curiosities through side projects.

Creativity is often stifled by bureaucracy. Slow, institutional grind can bring innovation to a halt and demotivate innovators by putting obstacles in their way. **To succeed in the sixth strategy, innovative leaders must eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy and encourage rapid and ongoing experimentation.**

The final factor for nurturing innovation is supportive collaboration across divisions, units, and teams. One study found that when two tech companies partnered to spark creativity, greater collaboration led to greater innovation as measured by the number of patents and participant ratings.

Fostering creativity doesn't have to mean disorganization, the absence of planning, or the boom and bust of waiting for *Eureka!* moments to hit. **The magic of innovation can take root and be nourished in systemic, consistent, and corporate ways that create the conditions for great ideas to take shape and flourish.**

Citation
Ludema, J. and Johnson, A. (2019, February 12). *Seven steps to creating a culture of innovation*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/amberjohnson-jimludema/2019/02/12/seven-steps-to-creating-a-culture-of-innovation/#30f9a6a7198e

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Article 2: How to enhance innovation with learning and development training

With modern technological advancements impacting nearly every industry across a range of fields, today's business market is driven by innovation. In this environment of rapid technological developments, the challenge for any organization is to bring employees up to speed, maximize their creative potential, and maximize the innovative potential of the organization. This process begins with training and technical assistance.

Conversations with learning and development (L&D) professionals in a 2019 report **revealed that innovative training strategy translates to innovative organizational practices**. Though many businesses fail to realize how training can affect their competitive edge, there are direct links between diversity and inclusion (D&I) training and revenue growth, learning and innovation, and increased revenues with increased investment in L&D.

The report further demonstrated that companies with revenue growth are 3x more likely to predict an increase in their investment in L&D. Professionals identified essential training

strategies that can move an organization to the top of an industry ladder by encouraging a new culture of innovation or enhancing one that already exists.

For Wyndham's 25,000 employees in over 110 countries, Anthony Sandonato, Vice President of Learning and Development, found that agility is the key to success in executing professional development. He argues that L&D strategy needs to be **"built upon that flexible framework, and designed to remain nimble and adjust to continuous organizational changes without compromising either the speed or quality of our talent development strategies."**

But keeping a business nimble can be a two-way street. Training employees to adapt to business needs is a necessity. However. to help employees practice how innovation may become an everyday part of how a company conducts business, an L&D strategy must adapt to *their* present and future needs as well.

Recognizing this need, Martin Hayter, Global Assurance Learning Leader at Ernst and Young argues that, "personalization can come either from our professionals accessing required content at the right time for them, or from choosing specific content relevant for their role and the clients they're working on." Technologies and markets move quickly. To keep up, companies must be agile in implementing new L&D strategies, developing new innovations on the fly, and training employees to adapt to an organization's fast-changing priorities.

Innovation additionally requires recalibration. In practice, this means investigating what training strategy shows itself best in company metrics, and has the greatest impact on employee performance and satisfaction. For example, findcourses.uk's 2019 L&D report demonstrated that 42% of employees valued professional development as their most important employee perk. Assuring that an organization implements the right fit will be a continuous process.

An organization must also be flexible yet reflexive. This means taking time to analyze training strategies post-implementation, evaluating organizational needs, and assessing current industry trends to re-strategize how to best apply innovation through L&D. The report further found that businesses with leaders highly invested in L&D were 3x more likely to say they were working in a culture of innovation. Trainees can better understand how to apply innovation relevant to them when a company adjusts L&D strategy via their feedback.

Allowing lessons from the training room to drive organizational culture can build innovation from the ground up or can realign an existing culture to be more adaptable to industry

demands. Innovation is not an inherent quality; it is a learnable skill. To apply this lesson, organizations must make training employees on innovation an ongoing process, dually nurturing a culture of innovation and a culture of learning to foster long-term success.

Citation

Maccarone, M. (2019, Dec. 9). *How to enhance innovation with learning and development training.* Innovation in Practice. https://www.innovationinpractice.com/innovation_in_practice/culture-of-innovation/
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Article 3: Culture for Innovation

A crucial first step in the innovation process is demonstrating a commitment to innovation. Creating and maintaining an innovation culture means expecting and encouraging innovation at every function and level of an organization. This builds a foundation for each pillar in the innovation framework. Progressing toward comprehensive changes that transform an organization is therefore rooted in creating a culture receptive to innovation.

The professional world has come to recognize that highly successful corporations that embrace social responsibility integrate this commitment to innovation in everything they do. From the copy room to the boardroom, they aspire to an integrated and coherent culture of responsibility. By embedding innovation-friendly practices and values throughout its operations, an organization signals its commitment to creating and sustaining a deep and broad culture of innovation.

Creating an innovation culture is also linked to creating a learning culture. At its core, innovation is about effective learning. Intentional learning processes can seed new ideas or identify the potential of already existing innovations. A learning culture can refine, improve, and look for patterns and meaning in activities. This helps organizations avoid sidelining or losing their best knowledge. Paying more attention to a learning culture—a work environment that promotes experimentation, collaboration, and risk-taking—also allows for systematizing innovation.

Current research indicates that cultures that spark innovation often place a premium on several key practices that can be integrated into any organization. First, management must **demonstrate leadership and intentionality**. Spurring innovation requires vocal and visible top leadership that encourages creativity coupled with supporting incentives and resources. While

leaders must identify some individuals with essential competencies in innovation to take charge of specific efforts, they can also open a call for innovation to all. Recruiting, training, nurturing, and rewarding innovative behavior creates a systemic commitment to innovation.

Organizations must additionally seek to **democratize innovation**. Innovation can spring from anyone at any time and place, sometimes as a modification of an existing concept or recombination of existing ideas. Democratizing innovation means developing extensive organizational practices to both discover internal innovation and open up to external ideas and processes. Empowering individuals is key, as this practice recognizes and catalyzes a broad range of people to participate in generating new ideas.

Enabling innovation also demands that organizations **run the risk**. Cultivating an environment of smart risk-taking and emphasizing learning from, not punishing, failure is essential to successful innovation. At the same time, smart organizations must be clear on defining acceptable and appropriate risk tolerance and adapt an approach to innovation that matches its level of strategic and financial risk tolerance. This risk tolerance can vary between for-profit and nonprofit/philanthropic enterprises, with for-profit entities often able to take greater risks, while nonprofits and philanthropic institutions can be hampered by budgetary constraints and donor restrictions.

A fourth ingredient to a culture of innovation is the need to **collaborate and network**. Great innovation often comes from a network of people joining disparate ideas together through teamwork. Collaboration nurtures the birth of novel ideas and recombining existing ideas, leading to unforeseen opportunities. The diffusion of information through networks is also critical, as is an organizational structure that bolsters collaborative working relationships. New social network analysis allows for understanding formerly invisible networks. This comprehensive overview can be harnessed to better utilize human resources and speed the flow of ideas, products, and information.

Organizations must further strive to **measure and be accountable**. Measuring and assessing effectiveness is a crucial piece of an organization's ability to experiment, test, and learn. New metrics systems let companies discover whether investments in innovation are yielding results. The U.S. Department of Commerce recently convened an advisory committee to join business, academic, and philanthropic leaders in defining innovation and exploring options for measurement. There is an increasing amount of attention to feedback and learning from innovations as they move from idea to practice. For example, eBay has created a feedback process on every transaction, and the Women's Funding Network developed its "Making the

Case" tool for participatory evaluation of social change with grantee partners. Cisco systems has reduced this movement toward rapid cycling of testing and improving ideas into the mantra: "Instant feedback creates instant success!"

Lastly, **communication** is key to an innovation culture. Innovation generates change and uncertainty, and organizations need processes to develop and share knowledge to reduce it. Robust communication enables wider participation in the innovation process when linked to the learning dimension of innovation culture. Good communication creates a friendly environment that welcomes innovators and innovation, decreasing the tendency for destructive internal competition in ideas between staff.

Many of these key practices can be found in the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's 2005 response to Hurricane Katrina. Within two weeks of Katrina's crippling of New Orleans, WKKF invested more than $12 million in local organizational partners working in health, youth, rural, and community development, as well as the coordination of efforts in the foundation's home state of Michigan to house and support evacuees. The speed and scale of the response was critical, but the effort was particularly notable for collaboration both within the organization and through partnerships with local leaders and groups.

Within the foundation, leadership sent a clear message that it wanted the problem approached with an inter-departmental and unified strategy that would lessen the impact of traditional divisions between teams. Various departments responded by pooling resources such as leadership contacts and organizational relationships in an open and transparent fashion, resulting in an integrated and coordinated effort.

Outside the foundation, on-the-ground decision-making was diffused, or democratized, as staff coordinated with and empowered local partners to think creatively at the community level. Greater flexibility and trust were an additional asset possible through the foundation's investment in former grantees. The effort lacked a sure-fire plan that guaranteed success, yet the foundation opted to take a calculated risk that allowed for quick and effective problem-solving via known partners with local experience.

Hurricane Rita struck the Gulf Coast of Mississippi just two weeks after Katrina and again put the effectiveness of these internal collaborations and external partnerships to the test. In response, the foundation expanded grants with the stipulation that grantees had to rapidly widen their efforts and innovate for immediate relief. By mid 2006, after further funding to

rebuild and address long-term challenges such as poverty, the foundation's total investment had reached $36 million.

WKKF's approach built and harnessed many key elements at the heart of creating a culture of innovation, demonstrating how innovation cultures can transform and hone an organization in new and highly effective ways.

Citation
Kasper. G, and Closehy, S. (2008). Intentional innovation: How getting more systematic about innovation could improve philanthropy and increase social impact. Kellogg Foundation. http://wings.issuelab.org/resources/9873/9873.pdf

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PART II: Case Studies of Obstacles and Opportunities in Innovation

One effective way to introduce new ideas and help people contextualize this new information is through the use of case studies. A case study is a common educational tool that provides narrative of hypothetical situations, or cases, that illustrate a broader phenomenon. In the following case studies, we present examples of organizations that are currently struggling with how to support a culture of innovation. Many fail to see innovation as an asset, are uncomfortable with change, refuse to nurture its development, or can't utilize it effectively. Though such organizations may remain profitable and competent, by not supporting innovation, they limit their potential to adapt, grow, and maximize their impact. As the following fictitious scenarios demonstrate, resisting innovation can result in detrimental consequences.

Case 1: The Public Health Coalition

The Public Health Coalition seeks to unify donors behind identifying, seeding, and sustaining like-minded organizations through its annual conference that brings together stakeholders to coordinate efforts in public health. But due to rapid political change, donors and partner organizations have increasingly developed varied strategies and priorities, leading to miscommunication, separate agendas, and both pulling away from the Coalition toward greater independence. The Coalition is failing to respond to partner organizations seeking to transform existing strategies and cooperate to generate new ones, a problem compounded by the fact that Coalition staff all come from academia and are unfamiliar with how to harness new ideas from broader society.

In turn, frustrated donors feel like their voices and ideas are going unheard by both Coalition staff and community members. The Coalition resists innovating its structure and processes, and fails to listen to and adopt potentially transformative ideas from outside sources. The Coalition needs to innovate, as it is hindering its relevance and threatening growth.

Guiding Question: How can the Public Health Coalition get back to serving all its stakeholders, as well as the broader community?

Case 2: Grassroots for America

In a similar vein, the nonprofit Grassroots for America's is failing to be responsive to its supporters. It was founded decades ago when political organizing was done from the top down. But through modern technology, the internet, and social media great ideas can come from the bottom up and mature through a two-way channel of communication that empowers individual supporters. Despite this, the organization is reluctant to decentralize creative control and invite input from its supporters on the ground, fearing the collaboration will create disorganization and make it lose focus. Grassroots for America is unwilling to loosen its grip on innovation by encouraging interaction between its staff and its supporters, leading to decreased creativity. It is also averse to risk-taking that could accelerate its impact and keep it from losing supporters eager for greater participation. By discouraging organizational experimentation and risk, not supporting greater interactivity, and declining opportunities to democratize innovation, Grassroots for America is missing out on new and inventive strategies developed by its supporters. It risks becoming obsolete.

Guiding Question: What strategies and approaches might Grassroots for America take in order to "win back" its supporters and build capacity?

Case 3: Foundation for a Green Bozeman

The Foundation for a Green Bozeman was created to expand and improve parks and green spaces around the city of Bozeman, Montana. But lately, donors have begun to grumble that their ideas fall on deaf ears and they are treated like ATMs. Community leaders similarly complain that the organization discourages their input and has no metrics in place to evaluate its effectiveness or maximize its impact on the community. Traditionally the organization measured success by dollars spent and pushed back on more tangible means of appraising its efficiency and outcomes.

But seeing that it was losing donors' and residents' support through its lack of responsiveness and accountability, the organization convened a series of roundtable forums to discuss

residents' needs and desires and disseminated feedback forms with its fundraising mailings. The Foundation then analyzed and incorporated the feedback into a yearly strategy document with expense outlays and tangible goals it seeks to meet annually. However, the Director of the Foundation has traditionally served as the gatekeeper to community development and organization, and appears to resist the Foundation's attempts for greater accountability and transparency. It appears that the Foundation is headed for a stalemate.

Guiding Question: How can the Foundation avoid a potential "personality clash" that would be harmful to its broader community service efforts?

Case 4: Synergy Solutions

Synergy Solutions is a management consulting firm that advises on strategic management to corporations, governments, and other organizations. It is currently attempting to integrate more innovation through better communication in its corporate culture. But many obstacles hinder this transition. For example, its departments operate in isolated bubbles that view themselves as competing factions within the organization, leading individuals and groups to view themselves as having inherently clashing interests and agendas. This results in a destructive tendency to hide ideas and attack others departments' innovations, discouraging broader information and idea sharing and participation in the innovative process. Better communication is, in short, not made a priority.

To counter these problems, leadership has taken steps to accelerate innovation by developing and implementing a strategic plan that presents a common vision for the organization. Programs and departments are urged to better exchange ideas and work together through a communal communications structure that emphasizes new processes for information creation and sharing within the social system. However, people are wary of sharing incomplete or unfinished ideas with colleagues with whom they feel tension. This has led to a sense of stagnation within the organization as people lack trust in themselves and colleagues.

Guiding Question: What can Synergy Solutions do to achieve an attitude shift around communication and idea development?

Case 5: Renewal Beauty Products

The CEO of Renewal Beauty Products believes in a purely hierarchical corporate structure. He comes from an older era in business where top-down management was a given. His philosophy on leadership is that a leader portrays strength, resolve, and unfailing competence. In fact, he sees any input from his junior staff as a threat to his control. He tells his employees what to do

and expects them to stick to it without question and punishes anyone who demonstrates any independence or strays from his dictates.

But Renewal has found that increasingly its influence and renown is diminishing as competing businesses introduce new ideas and creative products into the marketplace. Seeking to counter this trend, Renewal hired outside consultants to analyze its internal processes and procedures. They found that lack of an innovation culture, with a clearly articulated commitment to innovation, was holding the business back from meeting its potential. At the same time, the CEO has not encouraged relationship building within the organization, nor outside it. The culture feels insular and stuck in its ways.

Guiding Question: How can Renewal work to promote a culture of communication and idea-exchange that thrives on interaction with outside partners?

Author Biography

Benjamin Gleason, PhD is the Director of Applied Research for the Prospectus Group. He earned a PhD in Educational Psychology & Educational Technology from Michigan State University, researching how to best support communities of learners through educational technology. He is now Assistant Professor of Educational Technology at Iowa State University. Before academia, Benjamin worked in youth and adult-serving learning spaces for almost fifteen years, from designing youth-initiated community service projects and teaching high school in Richmond, California, to working as a university instructor in Guatemala. Benjamin is also a founder of the Prospectus Group.

Tanner Brooks earned his BA in Political Science from Oberlin College and an MA (Distinction) International Studies and Diplomacy from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, where his thesis focused on examining the application of international human rights norms to the experience of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. He has a decade of experience in national and international activism, advocacy, and education, from working on political campaigns, nonprofits, and political action committees to writing and teaching politics and sociology as a professor in Tunisia. His most recent work involves mentoring and tutoring teenage survivors of sex trafficking.