

# LEADERSHIP



## Igniting an Innovation Mindset By Jeff Gaspersz

**The wellspring of the innovation power of a company lies in the mind of its employees. When these minds are prepared for discovering and realizing new opportunities, the organization ensures it has an enduring internal capacity to innovate. In this article I would like to highlight the possibilities to build an innovation mindset by means of small initiatives with a profound impact.**

### How Paul discovers opportunities

I have an 88 year-old colleague, Paul, still teaching at our university with a vibrant energy. After earning his PhD at age 79, he took flying lessons, followed many courses, wrote 10 books and numerous articles. He established a new magazine and writes a weekly blog. Paul belongs to a group of extraordinary people with a mindset aimed at continuously discovering and realizing new possibilities.

When I asked Paul for his secret, he revealed that it consisted of two daily questions that prepared him for discovery. He has asked himself these questions for most of his life. His first question is: What have I learned today? His second question is: What can I improve tomorrow? Each evening he writes his answers to both questions in a small notebook.

This daily ritual changed his perception. Paul wants

to continue to learn and improve until the very end of his life. With these two questions he has developed a way of approaching everyday life as a meaningful universe of possibilities and opportunities for learning and improving are abundant. It is the same phenomenon that occurs when you have bought a car of a certain brand, in the color of your choice. Suddenly you begin to notice exactly the same car on many roads.

### A monthly question

We can apply Paul's mind-setting technique in a business context to find innovation opportunities. Suppose a manager of a sales team asks his employees each month: What issues or topics have arisen in the last few weeks, during conversation with customers that might indicate an opportunity for us?

The effect of this repeated question is that team members will become more attentive, and when visiting customers, for example, they will listen more carefully. Each month they are asked to share what is worthwhile, so when

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speaking with clients they will notice opportunities, unarticulated needs or complaints. As with our earlier example of a new car, the team will then begin to identify possibilities for improvement in abundance. Thus, a simple monthly can be successfully used to encourage the discovery of possibilities for improvement and innovation.

Questions are a simple and effective way to build an innovation mindset. It is essential to encourage employees to examine work processes from a variety of angles and regularly ask themselves: How can we do this in a more effective or efficient way? It is then crucial that management allow them the necessary time to reflect, and to act upon the answers.

What else can we do to create the desired innovation mindset within our company? There are many ways to bring about such a mindset, three of which are mentioned below.

### **Bringing in outsiders with solutions**

These could be managers or professionals from other companies that may have found solutions to comparable problems that your own organization is struggling with. Using this method, the Rotterdam Eye Hospital in the Netherlands learned about the reservation system used by the Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM). A KLM logistic expert then worked with professionals from the hospital to improve their patient planning and booking system, leading to a reduction in patient waiting times from an average of 12 to 4 weeks.<sup>1</sup>

We can expect a double harvest from innovation-oriented dialogue with individuals from other sectors. Firstly, we are introduced to new, unexpected ideas and ways of thinking that can be applied in our own company setting. The second harvest might be even more profound: dialogue with external creative talents challenges our employees and exposes the limitations of their own experience and thought patterns, thus broadened their mindset, which can then be fruitful in many areas.

### **Encouraging collaboration and creative tension**

Let us suppose that a manager gives a small notebook to all team members with instructions to carry it at all times in order to record ideas as they occur. Each week the team is invited to share their recorded ideas relating

to improvement and innovation and when a good idea is brought forward, a small ad hoc project group is set up for further investigation of the idea. This group is deliberately composed of a mixture of individuals from the manager's own team together with members of other teams or departments and they are to consider the chosen idea alongside their regular work tasks. After two months, the project group will present their results to the management.

Many positive outcomes can arise from this simple exercise. Managers frequently advocate the importance of innovation, but fail to integrate it into the work agenda. By taking action on good ideas, the leadership shows its appreciation of employee participation and the matter of innovation becomes a priority.

Moreover, respect for the creativity of employees stimulates a feeling of community and helps make the company a more attractive place to work.

An additional effect is that innovation-oriented collaboration across units is encouraged. People learn from one another and informal networks are formed creating even more opportunities for future collaborations.

Furthermore we introduce creative tension that is crucial for companies striving to innovate. Project groups will work hard to enhance their original idea and meet the deadline, while gaining a chance for recognition of their creative work. There may be some conflicting opinion because of diverse backgrounds and experience within the group, but that contributes to the creative abrasion necessary to increase alertness and productivity, and improve on an idea.

Finally, the most valuable and long-lasting effect is that we have focused the minds of employees on innovation and showed them that they can contribute either on an individual basis, by working together with colleagues from other departments, or even from other companies, in an open and informal way. Sharing the results then creates a positive reinforcing effect on the willingness of employees to participate in innovation projects.

Idris Ayodeji Bello, an African entrepreneur who won the 2012 Dell Technology Award with his invention of a low-cost device that enables blood pressure monitoring and data transmission via mobile phones, even coined a new term for this phenomenon. He believes that when like minds develop new ideas and solutions through collaborative work, it can be considered as *wennovation* rather than innovation, replacing the "i" with "we" to emphasize the importance of collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

Repeated cooperation across units in innovation projects has a profound impact on the innovation mindset. Employees enjoy the experience of being part of an exciting innovation community. This is exactly why organizations like Google are idea factories. They have taken away the barriers to innovation-focused collaboration. Chairman Eric Schmidt explains in an interview: "One of the things that we've tried very hard to avoid at Google is the sort

of divisional structure and the business unit structure that prevents collaboration between teams.”<sup>3</sup>

It is the core task of leadership to shape the conditions for such collaboration to flourish.

### Stimulating creative habits

We know that in order to find smart solutions we have to think differently; both from our competitors, but also differently from what previous experiences have often taught us. The realization that what made us successful in the past, will not necessarily do so in the future, triggers us to think creatively and focus on innovation.

The need for creative thinking is especially high in companies in emerging markets where low-cost products and low-cost business models are fundamental. This necessity spawns a tremendous inventive power. We see, therefore, in many African countries, a series of new inventions emerging.<sup>4</sup>

When searching for ways to enhance creative thinking we often rely on brainstorming or lateral thinking techniques. Of course these are important in helping to break old patterns and guide us to new avenues of thinking. The problem with these techniques is that they hardly influence our daily thinking patterns. They remain techniques we occasionally use but they do not become part of our second creative nature.

Studies of highly creative people show that these talents use hardly any artificial techniques to boost their creativity.<sup>5</sup> The secret to their creative genius are certain habits they have acquired.

When the great physicist Albert Einstein was asked how he differed from the average person, he gave a surprising answer. He said that when people were asked to find a needle in a haystack most people were glad when they found the needle and immediately stopped searching. “But I,” said Einstein, “I always wonder if there might be more needles hidden in the haystack and keep on seeking for them.” Einstein was pointing to a golden creativity-boosting habit: Never stop the search for new insights, perspectives and solutions. Or in other words: fight mental laziness and the inclination to habitually stick to old and familiar solutions.

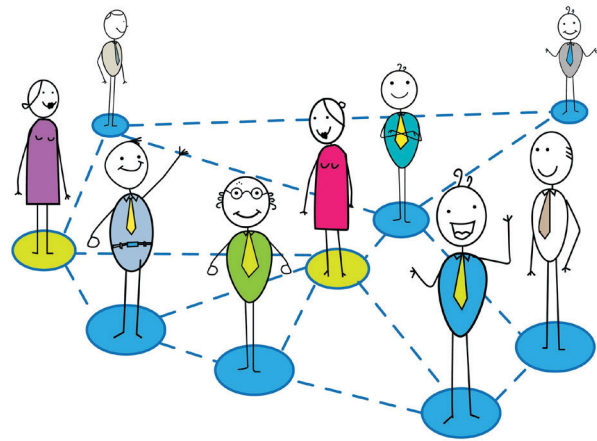
A manager I recently met shared with me his solution to resist such an attitude in his team. When his employees come to him with a problem, he will only listen if they bring two solutions they have thought up themselves. That creates the right habit!

Also, posing artificial barriers can stimulate the right habits for creativity. When an employee proposes a good idea we can create such a hurdle by saying: We will only take it into consideration if you redesign your idea and come up with a 40% cheaper version. By constantly challenging the creativity of our personnel, we build the right mindset, prepared for innovation.

Another creative habit to acquire is to examine a problem from different angles. If we are able to look from the eyes of customers we might discover new possibilities for meaningful improvements. A CEO asked his employees: What would you do differently if you could lead this company? This invitation to look at problems from another perspective brought not only new answers but also a deeper understanding of the leadership decisions in that organization.

### Challenges for the leadership

In some companies I have worked with as a consultant, I noticed that



the real hurdle for innovation was not the mindset of employees but that of the managers. People on the work floor had many ideas but they noticed that the leaders hardly listened to them or that ideas were crushed in the first instance with the simple argument that there was no time for it at this moment.

If managers really want to cultivate an innovation mindset within the company they have to welcome new ideas and reward the innovation-oriented behavior they would like to see, even if this does not lead to the desired results. A company where people like to contribute with their creative thinking is always a place with a tolerance for failure. When management demonstrates that a failure in innovation is just a valuable feedback to learning, the company becomes a safe place to experiment. Soichiro Honda, the founder of the Japanese Honda Motor Company phrased it as follows: “Success can only be achieved through repeated failure and introspection. Success represents the 1 percent of your work that results from the 99 percent that is called failure.”<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate challenge of leadership is to create a mindset in the company where innovation is not seen as something extraordinary that can only occasionally occur. The desired mindset is where all members of the organization consider it their task to contribute with their creativity and entrepreneurship in the search for new possibilities. This gives the organization a daily sustainable strength with which it can effectively respond to changes in a pro-active way.

In this article I have outlined ways in which to ignite an innovation mindset in a company, and these should be taken as pointers in the search for one’s own initiatives. Building an innovation mindset is always a gradual and tailor-made process; but when we succeed we will have a workforce capable of generating a sustainable competitive power through innovation!

### About the author

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