

# Positive Turbulence

## Developing Climates for Creativity, Innovation, and Renewal

Stanley S. Gyskiewicz

---

### Introduction

Browse through the business section of almost any bookstore, and you are bound to find dozens of books on creativity and its offspring, innovation. Read any business journal or news magazine, and you are likely to find articles on these subjects appearing with a predictable regularity. The reason is that creativity and innovation have been found to be the cornerstones of healthy organizations that are ready for reinventing themselves. Organizations do this by being relevant to changing markets and making use of new technology. I call this process renewal.

When employees are enveloped by a creative environment, they are free to puzzle over new information and creative ideas and implement successful and innovative solutions, plans, and projects. Given the fast-changing world we live in today, companies need precisely this kind of process and supportive climate to adapt and thrive in the long term.

As I have observed and worked with organizations over the past thirty years, it has become increasingly apparent to me that the most effective groups were the ones in which creativity flourished. In some of these places, the environment that caused that to happen was unplanned; in others it had been brilliantly implanted into the organization's fiber.

In such places I might find small teams tossing around crazy ideas for an upcoming project. Or I might see people of all different ages and levels and backgrounds somewhat rowdily generating ideas in a common work area. Or I might find individuals still in their offices at well past midnight pouring through seemingly unrelated books, Web sites, and periodicals struggling in the quest for the new.

Creativity does not have to be random. Organizational structures can, in fact, be put in place that provide for a more predictable, ongoing occurrence of innovation and renewal. This book is about setting up those structures through a process that begins with the recognition that change is inevitable, and then uses change, in manageable amounts, to the organization's strategic advantage. I call this process Positive Turbulence.

Turbulence is energetic, forceful, catalytic, unpredictable. It can be unsettling. Spreadsheets showing a devastating fourth quarter, reports of a competitor's secret new product, layoffs, and the merging of two divisions can cause unhooking in a company.

Yet often that can be a good thing. The dreadful fourth quarter could cause the company to take measures it would never have considered before that might ultimately lead it in a new and profitable direction. The competitor's new project might suggest that it is time for a shift in focus at the company, and this could result in rewarding new endeavors. The merger of two divisions, with the potential for a cross-fertilization of ideas, could

very well result in totally unforeseen initiatives.

What is needed to turn the turbulence into a positive force is knowledgeable management. This means putting structures in place for bringing in new information, making sense of it, and turning it into novel ideas that are useful and eventually can be implemented. "Residing out on the periphery of the organization today are the ideas which will revolutionize the organization tomorrow," said Dee Hock (1998), founder and CEO emeritus of Visa International, in a speech before Vice President Al Gore's Reinventing the Government Task Force's Reinvention Revolution Conference.

This process takes advantage of the ubiquitous turbulence found on an organization's periphery and brings some of it to center stage to be examined and used in a structured way. The external turbulence is then filtered, evaluated, and finally internalized, creating a controlled state of Positive Turbulence. The result is a resonance within the organization that stimulates innovation and renewal in a way that the process from information to creative idea to innovation and renewal repeats itself.

"The most creative thing occurs at the meeting places of disciplines," said Mary Catherine Bateson in *Composing a Life* (1990). "At the center of any tradition, it is easy to become blind to alternatives. At the edges, where lines are blurred, it is easier to imagine that the world might be different. Vision and new direction sometimes arise from confusion."

Chapter One explains why Positive Turbulence is necessary in companies, beginning with an examination of the fast-changing workplace that businesses face, and then seeing how turbulence, skillfully ushered into an organization, can be turned into a positive force for continuous renewal.

The four key elements that drive Positive Turbulence are explored in Chapter Two: difference (breaking out of the status quo), multiple perspectives (inviting divergent viewpoints and nontraditional interpretations), intensity (keeping the speed, volume, and force of the turbulence at an optimal level for change), and receptivity (providing mechanisms for individuals to be able to thrive in an environment driven by Positive Turbulence).

Chapter Three looks specifically at strategies that companies can implement for increasing receptivity to Positive Turbulence -- ways that employees can broaden their knowledge and experiences, what they can do to reinvigorate their thinking, and how companies can mitigate some of the barriers to and undesired consequences of Positive Turbulence.

Teams are suitable units for developing Positive Turbulence because they are breeding grounds for creativity. We look in Chapter Four at what constitutes a team, discuss strategies that teams can adopt for developing Positive Turbulence, and consider the role of a turbulence-driven team in a turbulence-averse company.

The strategies that companies can undertake to manage Positive Turbulence, from using the periphery most propitiously to developing the appropriate corporate culture to ensuring that the turbulence remains positive, are covered in Chapter Five.

Finally, Chapter Six gives a sense of the whole picture with real-world examples of Positive Turbulence in action. We look at three very different companies -- Norfolk Southern, Hallmark, and 3M (Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing) -- that all follow

the practices of Positive Turbulence. Although these companies go about it in very different ways, they share a common outcome of continuous renewal.

Positive Turbulence is a marvelous process that breaks through the walls reinforcing the status quo and rushes in with new information and novel ideas to reinvigorate companies on a sustainable basis.