

Chapter 1

Taking an Innovative Approach to Work

In This Chapter

- ▶ Engaging your most powerful personal asset
 - ▶ Providing yourself a place to imagine
 - ▶ Introducing daily creative practices
 - ▶ Broadening your experience
 - ▶ Benefiting from creative mentors
 - ▶ Leading and succeeding through your innovative initiative
-

Creativity is often thought to be the exclusive province of artists. This misconception gets a lot of people in trouble. Unless you spend a portion of every working day being creative and opening yourself to the possibility of innovation, you and your employer or business are going to be stuck in the past instead of creating the future!

As you open this book, you also need to open yourself to fresh ideas and curious questions. Innovation taps into the creative and intuitive side of your mind — the so-called right-brain activities that are essential to the arts and invention. But innovation in a business environment (and in government and nonprofit workplaces, too) needs more than creative thinking. It also requires you to enlist the enthusiastic support of others and to push ahead with plans that turn your ideas into reality.

Being creative in your work means bringing a special spark to it and recognizing that things are going to change — so why not be the one who dreams up and then spearheads innovations?

You can bring positive change to anything and everything, from products and work processes to customer complaints or resource shortages. Conflicts and disagreements are wonderful opportunities for innovation because they reveal the various limitations and tensions that are holding people back in

your workplace. Also, any special project — whether it's a major presentation, a new planning cycle, or a move to a new location — is a great opportunity to innovate. Whenever you face a new responsibility or problem, put on your innovation hat. This chapter shows you how.

Tapping Into Your Own Creative Force

I define *creative force* as the power to create that flows through all of us. This definition is important because it takes a stand on a pair of perennially controversial issues:

- ✓ Some people say that creativity is a rare skill, but in my experience, we all can (and should!) be creative in our approach to our working lives. Creativity may come a little more naturally to some than others, but trust me on this: You will benefit substantially from nurturing your creative force and adopting creative practices.
- ✓ Creativity isn't really about play or games. You need to approach it with respect because it's a powerful thing — perhaps *the* most powerful thing. Life is a powerful creative force; each birth brings a unique new being to life. The world is inherently creative, and so are you. You can and should tap into the power of this creative force.

You can see the power of creativity each time a successful innovation changes lives and the world. Creativity is an extremely powerful asset. When you use your natural creative power to innovate in your own life or to bring innovations to the lives and work of others, you're quite capable of changing your world.

The fact, however (and it's a somewhat sad one), is that most people never fully realize their creative potential. Most of us don't tap into the strength and power of our own creative capacity — let alone the additional capacity of those around us. Here are several proactive practices that can help you engage your creative force more fully than most people do.

Generating more ideas

Make a habit of thinking about possibilities. A simple way is to start with your own needs.

Imagining innovations to meet your daily needs

We think about needs constantly. I need coffee to get going in the morning, for example. Someone had a similar need and invented a coffee maker with a built-in timer. In thinking of the next breakthrough in coffee making, I start by considering my needs. I don't mind my home-brewed coffee, but really, I

prefer to have someone at a good cafe make me a cappuccino or latte from Italian espresso beans. This leads me to the idea of a coffee cart that would drive around my neighborhood and provide me a fresh-brewed gourmet coffee as I get into my car on the way to work — or maybe as I get out of my car in the parking lot before going into work. Aha! I haven't even had my coffee yet, and I've had an innovative idea! It's going to be a creative day.

Recognizing great ideas

Another good way to boost your creativity is to simply take note of creativity around you. People are surrounded by creativity and innovation but usually pass by it without taking special note. Recognize that you need the stimulation of other people's creative thinking. I collect good examples, rather the way an art collector gathers fine paintings. When I see a clever new product, I admire the insight of its inventor.

I also keep an eye out for creative advertising. Ad agencies have so-called creative departments full of wacky people whose job is to dream up something clever. Sometimes they actually do, and their example can inspire you to try new approaches to your own daily challenges.

Why start yet another memo or staff e-mail with a boring subject line when a catchy headline might make your point more creatively? Maybe you'll send out an e-mail to your staff with a subject line like "Breaking news: There *is* such a thing as a free lunch!" as a way to entice everyone to come to a lunchtime training session in your department. If you use that headline, of course, you'll have to actually deliver lunch for free, which may not be in your budget. But maybe you could get creative and ask the newest restaurant in your area if it would like to take advantage of an opportunity to provide samples of its fare to a group of local professionals. That way, you won't have to find cash in your budget for that free lunch. There's always a creative option, if not two or three.

Holding out for more options

Perhaps the simplest but most powerful creative practice is to insist (to yourself and to others) that there must be more choices. Creativity expands your options — but only if you realize that more options are better.

Imagine that you're being held captive in a locked basement, and your captor gives you a gruesome choice: You may either shoot yourself and die quickly (a loaded gun is provided for this purpose), or you may wait while the basement is flooded and then die slowly by drowning. Which option do you choose? If you say "Neither," you've taken the creative approach to this problem, but you were given only two choices, so it's up to you to create more options. Have any ideas? I know that it's hard to think under pressure, but please hurry up; your captor has snaked a hose down into the basement and is about to turn the water on. . . .

What did you come up with? Here are a few options I thought of:

- ✔ Find the toolbox (there's always one in a basement, right?), and use a screwdriver to remove the hinges from the basement door.
- ✔ Shoot the gun at the main electrical line (there's one coming into a breaker box in most basements) to start a fire, setting off the fire alarm, which is required in most building codes and, if you're lucky, is linked to a central dispatcher.
- ✔ Get your captor talking at the basement door (before he turns the water on), and shoot him through the door.
- ✔ Shoot the hose with the aim of breaking it and pushing the end out of the basement.
- ✔ Try to trick your captor into coming into the basement (perhaps by saying that you choose to shoot yourself, but the gun is jammed, and can he show you how to fix it?); then escape while the door's open.
- ✔ Find the master valve that controls the water to the building, and turn it off. (There's usually one in the basement.)

This mental exercise may seem to be far removed from your workplace challenges, but it's really not. Most of the time when there's a budget crunch, for example, senior management fails to ask for ideas before resorting to the axe. Suppose that someone says, "We've got to cut the budget, so decide which of your five staffers to lay off." You ought to stop and look for alternatives before you pull the trigger on anyone's job. There's always another way.

How about retaining all five employees but shifting them to four days a week, or looking for ways to conserve energy and materials instead of cutting staff? A brainstorming session with your staff might produce many practical ways to cut the budget without laying anyone off. It's worth a try. A little creative thinking can make a bad situation much better than it looks at first glance.



See Part II of this book for lots of techniques and tricks that can help you generate more options.

Identifying your biggest barriers to creativity

We all have the potential to generate imaginative insights and ideas, but most of the time, we don't. Why not? The biggest reason is that we're hemmed in by numerous barriers to creativity, especially at work.

Knowing your creative enemy

Studies show that the following are major barriers to creativity in the workplace:

- ✓ Lack of time and opportunity
- ✓ Criticism by others
- ✓ Strict, stern, or critical supervision
- ✓ Rigid policies, rules, procedures, or practices
- ✓ Exhaustion or lack of regular sleep
- ✓ Pessimism and negative thinking
- ✓ Lack of diverse experiences and inputs
- ✓ Either-or thinking that keeps people from exploring multiple options
- ✓ Lack of support for new ideas and approaches from your boss or colleagues
- ✓ Not knowing how to apply your creativity to your work
- ✓ Self-censorship due to lack of confidence, uncertainty, self-doubt, shyness, or other reasons

When you recognize your own barriers, you can take steps to reduce their power over you. If peers are negative thinkers who dismiss ideas out of hand, for example, do your creative thinking out of range of their negative comments. If you're under too much time pressure to think creatively about problems and needs, give yourself a creativity break: Get away from your desk, and spend a lunch hour walking and thinking without the pressure of constant interruptions.

Also, don't let self-censorship get in your way: Allow yourself to generate many ideas without concern for quality. Every barrier can be countered with a simple strategy that reduces its influence, at least long enough to allow you to generate some insight. For more help identifying your barriers, try taking the Personal Creativity Assessment created by yours truly (published by HRD Press and available on the Web site that supports this book, www.supportforinnovation.com).

Being alert to your stylistic strengths and weaknesses

Your *creative style* — the way you approach challenges requiring innovation — can also be a barrier to creativity because some people naturally prefer a structured, planned approach to a looser or more intuitive approach. Structure and planning are excellent for developing and refining a concept after you've come up with it, but they get in the way of initial insights. If you like to do things in order, value neatness, and feel most comfortable working from a specific plan, you'll find it difficult to switch to a freestyle, imaginative approach.

To switch your style and come up with fresh new ideas, think of creativity as a form of play. When you play, you let go of normal inhibitions and open yourself to possibilities, proving that you're capable of making creative leaps of the imagination, even if your normal professional style is stiff and structured.

Turn to Chapter 15 for more help on dealing with the limits (and corresponding strengths) of your specific creative style. If you aren't sure what your creative role is, visit www.supportforinnovation.com to test yourself and find out which stages of the *innovation cycle* (the process of generating, developing, and applying or commercializing an insight) are your strongest and weakest.

Bringing your creativity to practical, routine tasks

It may seem that innovation has to be about those major, once-in-a-lifetime ideas. Not so! There are a thousand small breakthroughs for every big one, and you'll never come up with a big idea unless you build your creative muscles by coming up with a thousand small ones first. Do things in new ways, and look for better approaches every day. (For specific tips on how to apply creativity in daily challenges, read Chapters 11, 12, and 13.) Also check out the sections "Constructing Your Creative Place" and "Introducing Creative Practices to Your Daily Routine," later in this chapter.

Taking advantage of your biggest enablers of creativity

A *creativity enabler* is anything that stimulates your creativity. Common enablers include a good night's rest, a change of scene, a good example of imaginative thinking, a cup of coffee, exercise, and a walk on the beach (or anywhere that's relaxing, open, and natural). Also, anything that makes you laugh enables creative thought. You may have other more personal enablers too, such as a creative mentor you can talk to, a favorite place, or a hobby that helps you relax and get "in the zone."

Visual images enable creative thinking because creative insights are often visual in nature. Too often, people approach work from verbal or quantitative perspectives. In fact, many challenges posed by employers and bosses are barriers to creativity, rather than enablers, because of the way they're presented. If you reframe the question around some visual exercise, however, you can convert it to a powerful enabler of innovative ideas.

A great way to stimulate your own creative thinking is to collect a few simple visual images; clip them from magazines or pull them out of the library of symbols in any handy word processing or design program. Then challenge yourself to use each image to come up with an idea by analogy.

Figure 1-1 shows how you might set up a visual challenge for your imagination if you want to come up with a new line of clothing that could boost sales for a clothing manufacturer or designer. Try your hand at it right now (because practice helps boost creativity). Can you come up with any fun ideas for new clothing brands? Do any of the symbols suggest possible brand names and concepts?

When you've tried this exercise yourself, look at Figure 1-2, where I've exercised my own imagination with this challenge. Are all my ideas likely to become million-dollar successes? I doubt it, but maybe one of them will.



It's important to avoid self-critical thinking when you exercise your imagination (see "Identifying your biggest barriers to creativity," earlier in this chapter).








Symbol	Brand name	Tag Line, Positioning
		
		
		
		
		
		
		

Figure 1-1: Use this form to come up with ideas for new lines of clothing (or substitute a product category of your own choosing).








Symbol	Brand name	Tag Line, Positioning
	Heavy Duty	Clothes that work for you (Traditional work clothes)
	Refrain	Helping you hit your high note (Attractive, professional business casual)
	Take One	Getting it right the first time (Stunning outfits for first dates)
	Back to Bed	Comfortable garments for a busy world (Casual, relaxing; the closest you can get to pajamas without actually wearing them)
	Continuing Ed	Clothing for the student in all of us (Adult version of popular "tween" styles)
	Family Planning	Watch out or you might start something (Sexy night-out clothing)
	Diner Designer	Making Americana Chic (Contemporary versions of styles from the 1930s and '40s)

Figure 1-2:
Examples of ideas for lines of clothing, suggested by visual images.

Constructing Your Creative Place

Does your workplace encourage creative thinking? Probably not. I visit a lot of workplaces at big and small businesses, nonprofit organizations, and all sorts of government agencies, and in my experience, fewer than 1 percent of them are naturally creative spaces. This is a problem, because people need innovation at work, but the spaces they work in make it hard to create.

A creative space needs to do the following:

- ✓ Make it easy to focus on an important challenge or task without interruption.
- ✓ Offer control of the physical environment, including configuration of desk and chair, lighting, layout, decorative elements, and sounds.

- ✔ Offer varied and interesting inputs, including visual, verbal, and other sensory inputs.
- ✔ Make people feel very comfortable, focused, and able to come up with good ideas.

To stimulate creativity, your workspace should *not* feel cluttered or crowded, or make you feel frantic and stressed by constant interruptions and emergencies. Unfortunately, this is just what most workplaces are like! It's up to you to fight back by defending a place and/or time in your day where you can be creative and open to possibilities. Some people can't achieve a calm, creative state of mind in their workplaces and have to resort to taking walks or retreating to a favorite coffee shop or park during their lunch break, but ideally, you can build a creative environment at work. Here are some ideas you can try:

- ✔ Post a sign asking not to be disturbed during certain times so that you can focus and think.
- ✔ Use a desktop lamp, shade, hanging cloth, or hinged freestanding screen to give yourself some control of your lighting.
- ✔ Clear the decks! Keep the cluttered pile of paperwork out of sight in a drawer or cabinet so that you're truly able to focus on one important problem at a time and not always be reminded of other tasks.
- ✔ Introduce something playful to your workspace. Rotate tactile puzzles and windup toys through the space to give you a different kind of stimulation than you usually get from work, or post humorous cartoons to inspire your imagination.
- ✔ If possible, introduce low-volume mood music of your choice (but of course, you'll have to keep it quiet enough not to disturb anyone else's concentration).
- ✔ Introduce something living, such as a potted plant or a vase filled with gravel, water, and spring bulbs.
- ✔ Display pictures of people who encourage you and believe that you are creative and brilliant. If this doesn't sound like your spouse or children, put their pictures out of sight when you try to come up with breakthrough ideas, and select a mentor instead. If you don't have a creative mentor, elect someone famous to fill the role. A picture of Albert Einstein really does make you smarter. Try it if you don't believe me!
- ✔ Keep a scrapbook or screensaver file of beautiful art, nature photos, travel photos, or other images that help you feel removed from work and your usual routine. Open the folder and scan the images when you want to take a creative turn.

Building your personal studio, shop, or laboratory

If you want or need to step up the innovation level with long periods of creative work, you may need to go beyond making small adjustments to a conventional workspace. You may need to configure a real studio, lab, or workshop for yourself, where the entire space is set up and equipped to support the creative work you have in mind. Consider these possibilities:

✓ An inventor working with electronics needs a place to do electronic engineering (requiring a computer running specialized design software), plus perhaps a place to mock up circuit boards and another place to mock up the actual equipment that the circuit boards go into. Depending on what you're working on, this workspace could be a fairly simple refit of a two-car garage or a

very expensive high-tech laboratory requiring the help of a venture-capital investor or an employer with a large research-and-development budget.

✓ A marketer working on ad campaigns and Web sites needs a very different sort of space — a studio with a flip chart for brainstorming, a computer with graphic design software and large display screen, and perhaps a round table for laying out examples of competitors' materials or holding group brainstorming sessions.

What kind of creative space do you need? Ask yourself this question and then do as much as you can (given your current resources) to create your own creative space.

It's important to find simple ways to protect your creative focus, whether by designating a space or a time to work on innovations, or both. Every workplace I've ever visited has had an official policy of being innovative, but because this goal is rarely translated into a work environment that's good for innovative thinking, it usually comes to nought.



A perfect workspace or place is very helpful, but in truth, much of what goes on when you innovate takes place deep inside your head. It's possible to stimulate breakthrough thinking by using your computer as a resource. Look up other people's work, and seek inspiration on the Web. Create a computer desktop with resources that you find helpful in your creative thinking, such as helpful computer programs, templates, and (especially) file folders of examples. I like to gather visual images that inspire me. They could be clever inventions, inspiring landscapes, or any other images that catch my eye and stimulate my imagination.

Also consider creating a playlist of music that you've selected because it helps you think clearly and creatively. (My creative playlist includes all the Bach cello concertos, which for some reason are amazingly good for stimulating creative thought.) You may also want to organize a bookmark folder of interesting Web sites for doing research to support your creative thinking or stimulate new ideas. Plugging into the facts, ideas, and designs of hundreds of other people is a great way to power up your imagination. (You can find a selection of inspiring images and examples at www.supportforinnovation.com.)

Introducing Creative Practices to Your Daily Routine

When I get called in to help an organization become more innovative, it's usually because something has gone wrong and the organization needs a big breakthrough idea in a hurry. Generally, I find that it has no creative routine, meaning that I have to get it from 0 to 60 creative miles an hour in a hurry — a task that's barely possible and usually quite a challenge. If you want to get in good cardiovascular shape by running, you don't enter a marathon as the first step. You start jogging every morning and work up gradually to long distances. It's really the same with creativity. Daily practice makes it easy to come up with the ideas you need, both big and small, when you need them most. If more people introduced creativity into their daily routines, they wouldn't need me to rush in and run creative retreats. They'd simply have the ideas they needed when they needed them! This section covers simple ways to develop a positive habit of creativity.

Balancing tight and loose activities

A *tight activity* is one that has strict parameters or rules and little room for variation or creativity. Business values tight activities because they produce consistent performance. McDonald's makes every burger exactly the same way, for example; that's part of its success formula. Also, it's important to enter accounting records accurately, using the same accounting system all year long.

Most of what people do in workplaces consists of tight activities. But tight activities put the right brain to sleep and reduce creative thinking. They need to be balanced with some loose activities.

A *loose activity* has little or no structure and no obvious right answer. It invites — in fact, requires — you to make things up as you go. Drawing a connect-the-dots picture is a tight activity; drawing a freehand picture of your own is a loose activity. Riding your bike, walking, or jogging a set route is a tight activity; exploring a new route is a loose activity. Learning a choreographed dance routine is a tight activity; choreographing or improvising your own dance is a loose activity.

What loose activities do you like to do? Make a list. Try to do at least one a day.

Freeing yourself to daydream

Mixing some loose activities into your normal routine of tightly controlled tasks is helpful (see the preceding section), but it doesn't guarantee breakthrough ideas because it still keeps you highly active. If your day is programmed with so many responsibilities that you can barely catch your breath, you have no time for creative thoughts to percolate.



I have an acquaintance who's an inventor. His output is largely creative. Every now and then, he patents some brilliant new invention that he's spent months thinking through. The rest of the time, he does a lot of thinking. His favorite places to work are hammocks and couches. He likes to close his eyes and lie back, letting a problem float around in his imagination until something clicks into place in a new way. It may look like he's napping. The only way you know that he's not is that every now and then, he writes another brilliant idea.

I'll bet that daydreaming on a couch is a very different approach to work from yours. If you're too busy for your imagination to get a thought in edgewise, you're going to have to take a timeout in your daily routine. Even ten minutes of gazing at the sky or walking through a flower garden may be enough to free your mind and allow creative thoughts to form. Your right and left brains compete for dominance, so to let your creative right lobe do its thing, you have to shut the logical, organized left lobe down at least once or twice each day.



Please note that this daydreaming has to take place before you get too tired for either side of your brain to do good work. If you work hard all day and then collapse on a couch in front of the TV, you won't do any creative thinking, because you'll already have used all your energy for thought. Build some daydreaming time into the early part of your day, when you're still fresh enough to do good creative work.

Pursuing interesting questions instead of letting them pass by

When you make a point of mixing some loose activities (see "Balancing tight and loose activities," earlier in this chapter) into your daily routine, and also find time to relax and let your mind wander or daydream now and then, you'll find that your naturally inquisitive nature starts to express itself. You'll be increasingly curious, and you'll be able to tackle interesting questions, both practical and impractical (and either type is fine for stimulating innovative thinking).

It's terrible to be too busy to take an interest in questions such as these:

- ✔ Why do we always do it that way? Isn't there any better alternative?
- ✔ Do you think someone's already solved this problem, and we just have to find out what they did?
- ✔ Why do we divide the work the way we do? Could it be divided up differently?

These questions are traditionally called “dumb questions” because they set aside our knowledge and experience; they get us to examine our assumptions and start all over with an open mind. Make a habit of asking dumb questions and exploring possibilities. Every innovation starts with a simple question. Ask enough questions, and you'll find that you've seeded a lot of exciting innovation.

Cross-training the body to strengthen the mind

The mind and body are inextricably linked. You can't do good creative work when you're tense, irritable, sad, or depressed, and you can't sustain creative effort if you're ill, weak, or tired. The body needs to be in reasonably good shape and feeling fairly well for you to come up with good ideas. Therefore, you need to tend to your physical needs and adopt healthy practices to achieve your full creative potential. Exercise and healthy living are important to innovation.

In addition to keeping you healthy, exercise can broaden your thinking and strengthen your creativity if you seek out new experiences through your exercise regime instead of always doing the same thing day after day. Try to pick up a new sport, join a class you've never taken before, or work out with a new group of people to build training and ongoing learning into your workouts.

Trying a new sport or acquiring a new skill is very much like trying to invent something. You can expect lots of early failures and a feeling of naïveté or even ignorance, followed (if you persist) by the growth of competence and a growing feeling of mastery. This experience helps you feel good about being naïve and ignorant — something that you need to practice to avoid self-censorship and fear of failure when you try to be creative at work.

Seeking Broader Experience

Wide experience helps you innovate because, as I explain in Chapter 11, creative concepts often come from the combination of knowledge about apparently unconnected things. It's important to get out of your world and explore other people's worlds so that you can draw on a breadth of knowledge and experience too.

Finding ways to challenge yourself

When people ask me what they can do to become leading innovators in their field, I always suggest that they study or work in some other field for a while. If you work in the insurance industry, go take an evening course on geology, art history, or microbiology; anything that you're completely ignorant of will do the trick. Within a few weeks, you'll be seeing your own field or work quite differently, I promise.

Studying another culture and its language is a great way to stimulate your thinking. Taking up a new hobby can also do the trick. I've met a lot of entrepreneurs who built their hobbies into successful businesses. But there's no one best way to ensure that you have a rich and varied range of knowledge and experience. Follow your nose, and let your curiosity be your guide. Being open to new challenges that interest you is a really great way to build your creative power. It gives you more inputs from which to create innovations, and it makes you flexible and hardy enough to be a champion of your innovation as well.

Taking personal risks

Innovators don't mind failure, but they aren't gamblers. They take calculated risks that have a reasonably high chance of success. To increase your rate of creativity and produce more innovations, you need to avoid making wild or irresponsible gambles, but at the same time, you need to avoid playing it safe, worrying about what people will think or what will happen if you fail. These sorts of thoughts can sabotage your efforts at creativity.

A lot of interesting research shows that successful innovators, entrepreneurs, artists, scientists, and other highly creative people tend to be very open to new experiences and ideas, and have a strong feeling of *self-determination*. Self-determination's psychological meaning (similar to its political meaning) is the feeling that you can individually decide your own fate. People who are self-determined

- ✓ Have a sense of being in control of their lives.
- ✓ Tend to listen to their own ideas and instincts instead of always doing what others tell them or what convention says.

How do you gain the strength of will and self-reliance that highly self-determined people instinctively have? You can strengthen these qualities by not worrying about the risks of being wrong or embarrassing yourself if you offer a suggestion that doesn't work; tell yourself that you can come up with better approaches if you keep trying. Regulating your self-talk is a useful technique, especially when you combine it with a daily habit of open, creative practice. See Chapter 9 for specific ideas you can use to adopt a more optimistic, creative personality or strengthen the creative personality you already have.

It feels risky to stick your neck out with an opinion, option, or design of your own, but that's just what business needs and what *you* need to do to have a successful career today. Practice self-determined, creative behavior until you begin to feel comfortable with the risks of being wrong and having your ideas shot down. I never worry that one of my suggestions will be shot down because I have confidence that I can always come up with more.



The nice thing about tapping into your creative force is that the more you use it, the stronger it gets. You may run the risk of being wrong now and then, but there's one risk that you never need worry about: You'll *never* run out of ideas! If one is shot down, just launch another, and another, and another. . . .

Spending more time with people who aren't at all like you

Diversity is the fertilizer of innovation. Diverse experiences and acquaintances give you a diverse range of inputs and ideas to work with. Many successful innovations actually arise from pairs or teams of people whose cultural and intellectual backgrounds are very different. Opposites react. Take advantage of the learning and ideas you get from talking with people whose experiences are very different from your own.

On the flip side of the diversity coin, people who share your background and experiences are easy to be with, but they tend to shut down your creativity. Comfortable social situations are actually barriers to innovation. When all of a company's managers are from the same background (or are the same gender or race), the company tends to stop innovating and eventually runs into trouble.



Mixing it up for sustained success

My dad was a really good investment analyst and had a great eye for strong management teams. I once asked him why he pulled all his clients out of the stock of a particular company when others were still rating it as a buy. In response, he pointed to a photo of the board of directors and said, “Notice that they all look alike? There’s no diversity in their management team. I’m concerned that they’re riding on their

laurels and don’t have new ideas.” He was right, and some years later, the company went into bankruptcy. That company was called Stone & Webster, and it was founded by my dad’s grandfather, Edwin S. Webster, along with his roommate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Charles Stone. Therefore, it was hard for my dad to sell off the stock, but he knew that a lack of diversity was bad for business.

Seeking the company of innovators

If you don’t spend time with creative people, you’ll have a hard time being creative yourself. The problem is that most of us work with people who aren’t creative (or who *seem* not to be creative).

Fewer than 10 percent of people are naturally highly creative, so your odds of bumping into someone who is naturally very creative are fewer than one in ten. Actually, the odds are worse than that in most workplaces, because hiring tends to emphasize qualifications and experience, not creativity. Even worse, of these few rare highly creative people, more than half hide their creative light under a bushel because of pressures to conform to a less creative, more conservative stereotype of what an ideal employee ought to be.



I once met a successful corporate chief executive officer who presented himself as a very cautious, conservative, dark-suited man at work, but on the weekends, he hybridized new varieties of day lilies. His secret creative passion helped nurture his natural innovativeness, and I think it kept him open to new ideas and strategies for his company. I thought it was a shame that his employees never saw this side of him, however, and I urged him to become more of a creative mentor by sharing information about what he did outside the corner office.



If you find yourself surrounded by people who don’t seem to be creative, seek out the company of some new friends, role models, or mentors. Most cities have inventors’ and entrepreneurs’ clubs, and I recommend attending a meeting now and then to pick up some of the positive energy these groups always have. Creative energy flows across any and all boundaries, however, so you can get just as much energy from attending a fiction-writing workshop as you would from attending a more business-oriented event. Be broad-minded about

your search for creative peers. Why not volunteer to help design and build sets for an amateur theatrical production? Anything creative and fun will do the trick; it doesn't have to be directly related to your profession.

Getting out of your personal and career silos

Experts on organization design use the term *silo* (from the tall grain silos of traditional farms) to describe workplaces where people are isolated into groups based on their functions. It seems efficient to have all the salespeople in one place doing sales and all the accountants in another place doing accounting. Why should they ever intermingle? If accountants are concerned about an increase in the discounts given out by salespeople, however, what can they do about it except perhaps complain to headquarters? If the two functions had some overlap, accountants and salespeople might naturally chat about such a trend and come up with an insight of value to the company.

Organizations do best when they don't have tall silos in which groups, teams, divisions, subsidiaries, or functions are isolated from one another. You also benefit from getting out of your silo, and you should try to get out as often as you can, even if your employer doesn't make it easy to do so. Try one or more of these ideas:

- ✓ Take a rotational assignment in another location and/or function.
- ✓ Wander into unfamiliar parts of your workplace to find out what the people there do.
- ✓ Take a class or workshop in a field you know nothing about.
- ✓ Read another profession's magazines or blogs instead of your own.

Any of these activities will help you mingle with people who work in different silos, exposing you to fresh thinking and ideally building your cross-silo network of professional acquaintances, too.

Supporting inquisitive behavior

An advantage of finding and spending time with creative people is that you can encourage one another's creativity. I use the term *inquisitive behavior* to describe the general approach of asking questions and stimulating creative thought. Inquisitive behavior is the same in every field. It gets you thinking about creative possibilities by asking *open-ended questions* (questions that don't have any clear right answer).

When someone from your creative peer group or your workplace asks an inquisitive question, encourage creativity by taking the question seriously and helping that person come up with possible answers. Also try asking inquisitive questions yourself — the more the better, especially in traditionally noncreative settings like staff meetings.

Here's an example of inquisitive questions you might ask in a meeting addressing the practice of offering customers discounts to close the sale:

- ✓ **Inquisitive question:** Why is it called *discounting*? What are the origins of that term?
- ✓ **Insightful answer:** Roman merchants would place extra product to the side of a pile being counted and offer to throw in the extra if the buyer purchased the counted pile at the asking price.
- ✓ **Possible creative response:** Stop discounting the price, and return to the practice of offering extra free merchandise instead. That way, customers continue to pay the list price, and they hold more inventory of your product, delaying the time when the competition will have an opportunity to try to take the customer away.

Inquisitive questions can lead to new solutions, as this example illustrates. Without an inquisitive question or a few, a staff meeting on the topic of discounting would simply focus on how big a discount to give. With inquisitive thinking, that same meeting can explore alternatives to straight discounting.



That said, think about the normal staff meeting and what would happen if someone asked, “Hey, what do you think the origins of the word *discount* are? Where’d it come from?” Most likely, the boss or someone else in the room would quickly say, “Would you please stay on topic? We aren’t historians; we’re salespeople.” Oops — so much for inquisitive thinking. Be careful not to shut it down, and if someone else tries to, shut him or her down by saying something like this: “Hold on. Let’s give the question a chance. Sometimes, the strangest questions produce the most useful answers.”

Learning from innovation mentors

To find a good *innovation mentor* (someone who can help you learn how to innovate and create), look for a person whom you find to be personally inspiring and who thinks you have a lot of untapped potential.



It’s best to find a mentor who doesn’t supervise you or have any other formal relationship with you, whether professional or personal, so that your mentoring relationship is the only way you relate. That way, you can focus 100 percent on discussing your career path, your current projects and challenges, and your ideas and how to move them ahead.

Also try to find people who have implemented an innovation by heading a team that brought about a major change or by starting a company or launching a new invention. Anyone who has brought about something new will have lots of helpful insights into the challenges of building momentum and implementing a new idea.

Mentoring is growing more common, but in most organizations it doesn't focus on innovation. Work to find a mentor who's been a successful innovator in the past and can share insights on invention, creative branding, novel business strategies, implementation, or other important innovation topics. Also try to make yourself available to *mentees* — people with less experience than you who would benefit from having access to your ideas and pointers. What goes around comes around, as they say, so by mentoring others, you may be more likely to be mentored yourself! (For more on how to set up and run productive meetings with your mentor or mentee, check out Chapter 3, and see my notes on the topic at www.supportforinnovation.com.)

Becoming a Leading Innovator

Tapping into your personal creativity allows you to become a successful innovator, because creativity is the fuel of innovation. You need to make a practice of imaginative thinking so as to have the creative power you need to fuel your own innovative career, as well as to fuel the innovations you bring to your work and workplace. That's why business innovation begins with a sustained effort to live a more creative life. An innovative approach benefits you in many ways:

- ✓ Helping you adapt to changing circumstances as you build a successful career
- ✓ Making you stand out from others, even if they have more formal qualifications or experience than you do
- ✓ Enriching your work by making each day a fresh, engaging experience rather than a boring routine
- ✓ Enriching your life by keeping your mind and body vital, flexible, and healthy

I've read a great many studies showing that people with an open, creative approach to life tend to live longer, rate themselves as happier than others, and have better luck avoiding major illnesses. They also tend to have more successful and profitable, as well as personally fulfilling, careers. There are a lot of reasons why you want to try to stand out as an innovator!

Making your creativity and drive visible to higher-ups

Many people are hesitant to offer suggestions or take initiative in their jobs, especially if they're relatively young or inexperienced, or don't hold a position of power and authority. It's a mistake to self-censor and hold your ideas back. How else are you going to stand out? How else are you going to get to do interesting new things? I hope that over the coming year, you'll develop a reputation for being an exceptionally innovative and interesting person who stands out from your peers because of your creative ideas and willingness to tackle new challenges.

Many people fear that their competence will be questioned if they appear to be too creative or bring up too many suggestions (some of which inevitably will be ruled out as impractical or — dare I say it? — dumb). Competence and creativity are two separate things, and you can show your competence by doing careful work and following through on commitments. If you're also bubbling over with ideas and enthusiasm, that's a bonus that doesn't detract from your competence; it adds another dimension to your workplace personality.

Another concern many people have is that they don't want to be viewed as criticizing their boss or their employer as a whole. Okay, I agree — you don't want to get stereotyped as a malcontent. But that has more to do with *how* you present your ideas than with *whether* you present them. If you frequently make disparaging or negative comments (“It's stupid how we keep doing X and never come up with a better way,” for example), you'll certainly earn a negative reputation. Instead of voicing criticisms, offer suggestions. Say “What if we replaced X with Y?” instead of “X doesn't work well.”

Everyone (especially senior managers) likes innovators for their useful stream of positive suggestions. There's a world of difference between innovators and complainers. If something bothers you, take your complaint to your creative space (time, place, or virtual place; see “Constructing Your Creative Place,” earlier in this chapter), and turn that complaint into several alternatives. Then voice your positive suggestions instead of the negative-sounding complaint.

Stepping up to development teams and roles

A great way to gain innovation expertise and show that you have lots of creative energy and initiative is to volunteer to help implement a positive new change. Most workplaces have at least a few committees, teams, or work groups that are tasked with solving a problem or handling a difficult

transition. Because these assignments are temporary, they draw on volunteers who do double duty, helping the team as well as covering their normal duties. Many people think that you'd have to be insane to take on an extra task voluntarily, but I think you're insane if you don't. It's the perfect opportunity to test your innovation skills and demonstrate your resourcefulness and drive. Make something new happen in your workplace at least once this year — preferably before you finish reading this book.

If you have any trouble with people who resist the new and blame you for their problems, check out Chapters 9 and 13, where problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies can help you deal with those naysayers in your workplace who don't like innovation. Chapter 3 has resources for leading a project team, should you be lucky enough to be put in charge. And Chapter 18 covers how to take an idea and run with it on your own as an entrepreneur, should you decide that it's time to go out on your own and build your own business.

