

13 innovation culture practices never to ignore

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Innovation is the process of translating an idea or invention into a good or service that creates value or for which customers will pay. To be called an *innovation*, an idea must be replicable at an economical cost and must satisfy a specific need. *Innovation* involves deliberate application of information, imagination and initiative in deriving greater or different values from resources, and includes all processes by which new ideas are generated and converted into useful products. In business, *innovation* often results when ideas are applied by the company in order to further satisfy the needs and expectations of the customers.

A *culture of innovation* is an environment that supports creative thinking and advances efforts to extract economic and social value from knowledge, and, in doing so, generates new or improved products, services or processes. A healthy culture of *innovation* has a shared set of values and mutually reinforcing beliefs about the *importance of innovation* as well as an integrated pattern of behaviour that supports research and innovation. A thriving culture of *innovation* can leverage the existing strengths of a given research and *innovation* ecosystem.

Workplaces that foster a culture of innovation generally subscribe to the belief that *innovation* is not the province of top leadership but can come from anyone in the organization. *Innovation cultures* are prized by organizations that compete in markets defined by rapid change, maintaining the status quo is insufficient to compete effectively, thus making an innovation culture essential for success.

Here are some innovation cultures never to ignore

Tolerance for Failure but No Tolerance for Incompetence

Given that innovation involves the exploration of uncertain and unknown terrain, it is not surprising that tolerance for failure is an important characteristic of innovative cultures. Some of the most highly touted innovators have had their share of failures.

Willingness to experiment but highly disciplined

Organizations that embrace experimentation are comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. They do not pretend to know all the answers upfront or to be able to analyze their way to insight. They experiment to learn rather than to produce an immediately marketable product or service.

Psychologically safe but brutally candid

Psychological safety is an organizational climate in which individuals feel they can speak truthfully and

openly about problems without fear of reprisal. Decades of research on this concept by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson indicate that psychologically safe environments not only help organizations avoid catastrophic errors but also support learning and innovation. If people are afraid to criticize, openly challenge superiors' views, debate the ideas of others, and raise counter perspectives, innovation can be crushed.

Collaboration but with Individual Accountability

Well-functioning innovation systems need information, input, and significant integration of effort from a diverse array of contributors. People who work in a collaborative culture view seeking help from colleagues as natural, regardless of whether providing such help is within their colleagues' formal job descriptions. They have a sense of collective responsibility.

Flat but Strong Leadership

An organizational chart gives you a pretty good idea of the structural flatness of a company but reveals little about its cultural flatness how people behave and interact regardless of official position. In culturally flat organizations, people are given wide latitude to take actions, make decisions, and voice their opinions. Deference is granted on the basis of competence, not the title. Culturally flat organizations can typically respond more quickly to rapidly changing circumstances because decision making is decentralized and closer to the sources of relevant information.

Team visibility into the bigger picture

Give your team the chance to see the big picture. As a leader, it's your job to inspire your employees to stand out by maintaining transparency and open communication. The innovators and creative thinkers in your company want to know that their work is having a material impact. Giving them that visibility allows them to understand how they can continue to effect change.

Listening to the front lines

A great way to encourage innovation from employees is simply to ask them about and value their views and opinions. Some topics I include in my company's weekly progress meetings are competitors who might have beat us for a deal and why, as well as what was effective and what else could help streamline our process.

Specificity about the ideas you want to address

Managers must ask their teams to come up with new ideas in a specific area of the business, not your business as a whole. For example, ask for ways to improve a specific work process or ways to reduce the cost of a specific service. Setting up parameters for a creative process can be incredibly productive.

Encourage Process Ownership

The first step is documenting the process. You can begin with Google Docs before it grows into wikis and intranets. Once there's structure, gather input from everybody, but put one person in charge of that process so that nothing becomes paralyzed by analysis.

Build a Culture of Engagement

Employees are most innovative when they are engaged in their work, that work is meaningful, and they understand the part they play in the company's goals. A culture of engagement depends on employees feeling that they can speak and be heard, which in turn depends on managers who are willing to listen.

Being open to all ideas

Never belittle an idea. The moment you judge a person because of their ideas, they will stop desiring to provide them for you. Keep your environment healthy, and you will avoid the toxicity of bad ideas and good ones being lost.

Allow employees to research the broader business landscape

When employees spend time investigating how other businesses in different industries operate, they can draw inspiration from what they see and come up with their own unique ways to apply what they've learned to your business. While you can also have them keep an eye on the competition, you must encourage them to explore how other companies innovate to help your business truly differentiate itself.

Get innovators in front of your customers

Customer research doesn't stop once you've built the product. Managers should regularly put their teams in front of customers to learn about their evolving journeys. How does your product fit into their lives? What do they wish it could do? What other problems do they have? If they could wave a magic wand, what would they do to make their lives easier? Customer feedback is oxygen for good ideas.

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