



# BUSINESS INSIGHTS FOR ACTION

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## HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO THINK MORE INNOVATIVELY?

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**How can we encourage employees to think more innovatively?**

There are many barriers to thinking more innovatively. The trick is to overcome or compensate for those barriers. But this is not easy. In fact, these barriers are hard to overcome because they often become deeply embedded in what might be called, “the way things are normally done.” Innovating means doing things that are, in fact, not normal or out of character for an organization. This is challenging for many at best and scary and intimidating at worst. But if we see that what is “normal,” is, in fact, just one out of many viable ways of doing things, then innovation ceases to be intimidating; indeed, innovative thinking becomes invigorating, exciting and profitable.

The difficulty of thinking innovatively in a company might be made clear by comparing the way adults approach getting through their daily lives to the ways many kindergarten children approach day-to-day activities. With all the real pressures and demands of daily life, many adults search for the most efficient ways to do things. This efficiency becomes inscribed in our life as “habits” and they help us to avoid chaos and exhaustion, like always paying the bills on a certain day of the week.

Most kids don’t have the litany of pressures faced by adults. Their prolonged childhood (compared to other animals) with a relative lack of responsibility gives them the chance to explore their world in a much more open-ended way. When placed in front of a pile of blocks, a kid’s relatively unstructured mind could devise many ways to use those blocks, many of them surprising. Those blocks could be buildings, trees, or people – but why not pretend “currency,” playing

pieces of another game, or elements of an abstract mosaic?

In contrast, adults working in a business have some great pressures to be quick and efficient. If they're paid to make a tower out of those blocks, the best way to receive recognition is to make those towers bigger, sturdier, and faster. This is great, but what if there was a market for decorations that could be exploited with those same blocks but nobody sees it because they're too busy making towers? This is the juncture where being too efficient becomes, ironically, unproductive.

One way management can attend to fostering innovation and long-term productivity is to create (or set aside) the time and space for themselves and their teams to experiment and learn – relaxing a bit from efficient habits. This can allow employees to ask "what if?" and "what's next?" for their company as well as their industry. The time could be in the form of setting down a rule that 5% to 10% of an employee's time must be dedicated to innovation. The space where this could be accomplished could be found between a company's "silos" – the bastions of habit and efficiency. In these areas, people from different business units and functions can come together and exchange ideas. That can happen in a variety of venues: through brown-bag lunches, seminars, or innovation forums.

But we have to remember that efficiency of the old ways must continue to prop up the organization at the same time that new innovative paths are being explored. Employees have to be responsible and not see innovative initiatives as a free pass to do anything. They still need to be committed to their day job and deliver at the highest level while thinking about what they can do to change the game in their current role. Some suggestions to think

more innovatively would be to: (a) talk and listen to your customers, suppliers, colleagues and even competitors; (b) document your insights and "a-has"; and, (c) speak with other like-minded people and ask them for help coming up with ideas and review them afterwards.

Coming up with a way to make innovation acceptable in long-standing businesses explains the rise of a new term used to make innovation more understandable: the corporate "sandbox." This is the place for serious play, a place where innovative thinking is fostered and encouraged by acting differently – unconstrained within the limits of the overall corporate strategy. The innovative options can be immense, but they still follow a discernible direction. A famous instance of this is Google's productivity stemming from its strategy to make the entire world's information easily accessible to individuals.

Lastly, leaders have to tolerate failures and employees have to take risks. We need to create a culture of learning similar to that seen in kindergarten – or, in a research lab. In either place, kids or scientists learn by experimenting, by trial and error. They are passionate, patient and persistent. Out of ten tries (experiments), they may both find one success. But neither the kid nor the scientist would say that they had nine failures. Instead, they say that they had nine learnings that allowed them to get the one success.

In general, to think innovatively and act differently consists of three major steps: asking "what if?" and "what's next?" around your current situation; listening (not talking) to a diverse group of people; and, experimenting to learn.

### **Business Insights for Action**

Business Insights for Action is a collection of ideas generated through surveys, work with clients, education and workshops that provide unique insights. The objective is to demystify what it takes to make innovation real and to add practical and actionable ways to help practitioners and create the foundation to drive the next generation of thought.

### **About IXL**

The Center for Innovation, Excellence and Leadership (IXL Center) was founded by individuals who previously led the Innovation Practice of Arthur D. Little, IMI and the Monitor Group. The mission of IXL Center is to (1) provide training for practitioners and managers to become high performing innovation managers, (2) develop and publish deep insights on the topic of innovation breakthroughs and innovation management, and (3) build a community of innovation thought leaders and practitioners. The IXL Center has locations in Boston, Dubai, London, Shanghai and São Paulo. The Center has strategic partnerships with Hult International Business School, Imaginatik, InnovationTools and Arthur D Little. IXL Center's faculty includes innovation leaders from companies like Motorola, Osram Sylvania, Natura, GEN3, Palladium Group and Arthur D. Little. For more information, please contact [milagros.masini@ixl-center.com](mailto:milagros.masini@ixl-center.com), call +1 857 212 3430 or go to <http://www.ixl-center.com>.