

On Creating a Culture of Innovation



"Companies are actually living organisms, not machines. We keep bringing in mechanics, when what we need are gardeners." ~ Peter Senge

Sustainable innovation, the endless effort to find a better way, cannot be achieved by robotically lining up best practices and imitating them. The real catalyzing agent for renewable innovation is the ground from which these best practices spring -- the confluence of purpose, people, and processes better known as *culture*.

From where will the next wave of groundbreaking innovation come?

Not from organizations mechanically mimicking each other's best practices, but from organizations with the authentic commitment to take their stand on ground that has been *cultivated* for breakthrough.

If you check the contents of the most popular books on innovation, the same topics show up again and again: strategy, systems, process, leadership, customer focus, risk, speed to market, prototyping, metrics, mass collaboration, market intelligence, technology, and creative thinking.

Clearly, all of these topics are important. But none of them can take root in an organization without one fundamental element being in place -- a consciously created culture of innovation.

Is such a culture simple to create? *Yes*. Is it easy? *No*. And the reason why it is not easy is because the ground of most organizations is hard, untilled, and in major need of clearing.

The metaphor that most clearly conveys the effort required is *creating a garden*.

To experienced gardeners, the steps needed to create a garden are simple. To the inexperienced gardener, it is a tangle of complexity.

Yes, gardening demands sustained and methodical effort. And yes, sweating comes with the territory. But getting a yield -- something to harvest -- is a fundamentally straightforward task.

If your company is clear about the effort required, creating a culture of innovation (*lets just call it a garden of innovation*) is simply a matter of taking the time to execute each step thoroughly -- in the time honored way gardeners have always practiced their craft.

1. WHET THE APPETITE

If you are serious about being a gardener of innovation, the first thing you will need is hunger -- a real appetite for results.

Growing a garden takes sustained effort. It is hard work -- most of it unglamorous and unappreciated. Hunger for a yield is the serious gardener's real motivator. Yes, the serious gardener likes being outdoors and, yes, the serious gardener likes getting exercise, but the ultimate product of his/her labors -- the harvest -- is what it is all about.

Without this level of commitment, the gardening effort remains only a hobby and does not have the *roll up your sleeves and get dirty* quality so essential to reaping a result.

If your workforce has no appetite for innovation, you will need to find a way to whet it. If you choose not to, people will sit idly by, waiting for R&D, senior leadership, or the tooth fairy to lead the charge. And while they may talk about growth, shovels, and the need for bulk purchase of mulch, talk will not put food on the table.

Fortunately, somewhere, deep inside everyone in your organization is the impulse to create. This impulse is innate. **Your task** is to awaken this impulse and help people own the effort to innovate. If they do not own the effort, the only thing you will be eating at harvest time will be your own words. (P.S.: Winter is on the way.)

2. STAKE and PREPARE THE GROUND

Amateur gardeners, fueled by visions of ripe tomatoes, have a tendency to plant before they are really ready. Unclear about how large a garden they can sustain, unsure about what is needed to prepare the ground, unable to resist the impulse for a quick yield, they rush in willy nilly.

The result? Lots of wasted effort and the kind of sweating that signifies almost nothing. The same holds true for organizations who claim they want a culture of innovation.

The antidote is a simple, two step process (though the description of the process is much simpler than the execution).

First, an organization needs to get clear about the scope of the effort they want to make. It needs to stake its territory or, more precisely, define the fields in which it wants to innovate. (If it tries to innovate everywhere, all the time, it will only deplete its resources and exhaust its workforce.)

Secondly, it needs to prepare the ground for planting.

This task includes removing obstacles that will interfere with growth, as well as enriching the fertility of the soil. Weekend gardeners cringe at this kind of preparatory effort. It does not feel like fun and there is nothing immediately to show for it. But without this effort there will be no foundation -- no ground -- for future success.

3. FIND THE SEEDS

You can have ample space to plant a garden. You can know exactly where that ample space is. And you can have lots of fertile soil in this ample space. But unless you have healthy seeds to plant, space is all you will ever have.

If you want a garden of innovation, you need seeds. Not just one kind of seed, but many. Indeed, the more varied seeds you have, the greater your chances for an interesting yield.

In the realm of innovation, ideas are the seeds. All innovation begins with an idea. Ideas are the fuzzy front end of the innovation process -- the alpha and omega of new growth. No ideas, no innovation. Its that simple.

The big question, then, is this: Where will your company get its new ideas? Is there an existing process? And if so, is this process working? Can you count on your workforce to deliver high quality, game changing ideas? Or is there something else you need to be doing in order to tap their brilliance?

4. PLANT THE SEEDS

While it is true that some seeds, spontaneously carried by the wind and landing on fertile soil, find a way to plant themselves, most gardens require that seeds be planted in a more dependable way.

If your company is sincere about its intention to create a culture of innovation, it will need to refine its seed planting process. More specifically, it will need to establish a more effective way for the carriers of seeds to increase the odds of those seeds taking root.

Yes, aspiring innovators will need to become more adept at pitching/planting their ideas. But at the same time, the people to whom new ideas are being pitched will need to become more **receptive** to the possibility that something new is worthy of taking root.

Having a silo of healthy seeds is a good start, but ultimately those seeds need to be planted -- and they need to be planted in a way that will radically increase the odds of them growing into seedlings.

5. FENCE THE GARDEN

If you have ever planted a garden, you have experienced the phenomenon of uninvited predators showing up at all hours to devour your tender, young seedlings. Deer, raccoons, moles, rabbits, and a host of other unidentifiable varmints seem to have no other mission in life but to downsize your dreams of winning the state fair or, at the very least, eliminate all possibility of you having fresh lettuce for dinner. It comes with the territory. And it will continue to come with the territory unless you fence your garden.

Organizations of all shapes and sizes experience the same phenomenon.

Promising new business growth ideas -- the tasty indicators of breakthrough innovation -- are routinely devoured by ravenous corporate naysayers. That is, unless the organization finds a way to protect their aspiring innovators.

Your role, as a gardener of innovation, is to fence your garden and protect your people from the overly acidic scrutiny, doubt, and premature evaluation of predominantly left brained, metric driven, analytical inhibitors of innovation. It can be done. It must be done. And you are the one to champion the process.

6. TEND NEW GROWTH

Conceiving a garden is relatively easy. It requires no special skills, discipline, or education. Anyone can do it. Indeed, anyone *does* do it every single Spring and Summer. Getting a harvest, however, is an entirely different matter. It is not so easy -- and unlike conception, requires skill, discipline, resources, and the ability to learn on the job.

In the same way, *conceiving* new ideas is relatively easy. It happens every day of the year to millions of people. Bringing them to fruition is not so easy. Along the way, they get neglected, mishandled, and trampled on. What starts out as a brilliant new possibility, often shrivels on the vine. Most organizations have no conscious process for nurturing the growth of new ideas.

As a result, many powerful, new ideas never mature.

They *may* break new ground, but they do not necessarily flower and bear fruit. **The good news?** It does not have to be this way. With the right kind of sustained effort, gardeners of innovation can dramatically increase the odds of exciting new ideas becoming part of the harvest and making it to market.

7. THIN and TRANSPLANT

Inexperienced gardeners, intoxicated by their need for a big harvest and overcompensating for their fear of having nothing to show for their efforts, tend to plant too many seeds too close together. Their fear usually dissipates in a few weeks when the first sprouts emerge, but then another challenge surfaces -- what to do with the apparent bounty of new growth?

While the profusion of greenery certainly looks good to the untrained eye, the reality is different. New seedlings start competing with each other for water and nutrients. Roots entangle. Left unaddressed, the results are disappointing -- row after row of stunted, scraggly plants.

Savvy gardeners respond quickly, thinning out new growth to make room for a select number of the healthiest plants to flourish.

Really savvy gardeners go one step further -- transplanting the healthiest of the thinned out plants to new, roomier locations.

Organizations trying to raise the bar for innovation face the same challenge. Intoxicated by their need for impressive growth (and wanting to involve as many employees as possible in the process), they get overwhelmed by a profusion of ideas and initiate too many projects -- ideas and projects that end up competing for the same, finite resources.

The result? Scraggly, stunted, and undeveloped ventures.

The **antidote?** A clear strategy for how their organization will evaluate, select, and fund new initiatives -- along with a process for identifying promising new growth to be transplanted for future development.

8. CELEBRATE THE HARVEST

All cultures around the world have a holiday, ritual, or ceremony dedicated to expressing gratitude for the bounty of the harvest. In their bones, they understand the purpose, power, and privilege of giving thanks. Their recent harvest may have fed the body, but the collective **acknowledgment** of the harvest feeds the soul, strengthening everyone's resolve to begin the growing process again the next season.

Corporate cultures could learn a lesson or two from this age old practice.

Historically, organizations have been severely lacking when the time comes to acknowledge the harvest and the people whose efforts were essential to manifesting that harvest. The endless demand for output drives most business leaders to conclude that acknowledging successes is a waste of time -- a luxury no bottom line watching organization could afford. Somehow, deep within the collective psyche of senior leaders, lurks the fear that celebrating successes will invariably lead to a fat and lazy workforce.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

People flourish when their efforts are acknowledged -- not only individually, but as an entire workforce. If you are serious about establishing a sustainable culture of innovation, remember to take the time to acknowledge your gardeners. For their effort. For their resilience. For their collaboration. And for whatever harvest they are able to manifest.

Food for thought?

