



# Innovation: turning good ideas into reality

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## **Maggie Smith, HR Membership and Business Development Manager**

In our fast-moving working lives, innovation has become something of a buzzword along with 'strategic thinking' and being 'commercially minded'. But what do we mean by innovation, or when we say we want our people to behave innovatively, or that ours needs to be an innovative organisation? And how on earth do we start doing it?

To most people, innovation means doing something new or doing it in a new way. In our work at IES, we go a little further and define innovation as creating value by doing or creating something new. Innovation for innovation's sake is a bit like change for change's sake. Without purpose, advantage, and improvement it becomes meaningless and has the opposite effect in terms of engagement and performance than you would hope.

By new, we don't mean always mean brand new. Often the greatest benefits can be made by refining and renewing what's already in place. Not tinkering around the edges and adding bits on, but a thoughtful review building on what is already successful – taking an appreciative inquiry approach by asking, 'What's working well and how could it be even better?'

What is important is the outcome not the process, although below are a couple of tested frameworks that can assist. So, innovation for what? Innovation appears in many guises, not just something that is new and tangible, although the innovation of things (product innovation) is certainly important. In innovation workshops it is often this sort of innovation that is cited first: the Dyson vacuum, Edison's light bulbs and so on. Equally important, and often overlooked when innovation is being considered in organisations, are process innovation, service innovation, organisational innovation, and market innovation. As with change, innovation can be incremental or radical.

When we talk about innovation in terms of leadership, it is recognised that setting out to be innovative is a bit like setting out to be inspirational: a worthy intention but tricky to deliver. At best, we can strive to create an environment that fosters innovation (and its partner in crime, creativity), and there are numerous approaches and techniques we can employ to help in that quest.

Typically, a number of elements need to be in place for innovation to become commonplace in an organisation, such as ideas, culture and process. Generally, there is no shortage of ideas in organisations; however, it is less usual for something to be done with those ideas – even the good ones. A number of reasons exist for this. We're often so focused on getting the job done, full steam ahead, that the necessary space to explore and implement ideas is often lacking and good ideas are left to wither. Very often the people with the best ideas for improvement are front-line staff rather than managers and yet it's often the case that these people are discouraged from sharing their thoughts. Either they don't think it's their job, only some people are allowed to have ideas (especially if you have a 'creatives' bit), or they don't know how best to articulate their ideas or move their ideas along.

Workshops about innovation are often partnered with creativity – *Inspiring Creative Thinking and Innovation, Creative Thinking and Innovation in the Workplace...* and it's often this creative aspect of innovation that puts people off, or makes them think it's not for them or they can't do it. When we ask a group of people if they're creative, the overwhelming response will be a somewhat embarrassed 'no'.

Of course, once we start to talk about what it means to be creative, minds change. We tend to think of creativity in terms of something arty. Indeed, 'I can't draw' is often the response to the question. Anyone who travels frequently on London Underground is creative: whenever your usual route is closed to you, you find previously unexplored ways to reach your destination. In fact, whenever we're faced with a block, most of us will find a way to get where we need to be, and that is creativity in action: coming up with something that wasn't the original plan.

Anything that moves us beyond our front-of-mind thinking and prompts us to reflect on something and find a better way of doing that something, is tapping into our creativity and ability to innovate. Young children have this sort of thinking naturally – they haven't yet started to get in their own way, or listened to others telling them what's possible, what's allowed and what will work. This sort of thinking is called divergent thinking and it drops off alarmingly with age (98 per cent of three to five year olds can think divergently; 10 per cent of 13 to 15 year olds and just two per cent of 25 year olds). Happily, there are things we can do to encourage divergent thinking.

*'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.'*

Picasso P

Ways of activating our creative thinking:

- Play: even fiddling with a bit of blu-tack whilst listening or thinking about a better way of approaching something will encourage creative thinking. Some years ago the DfT opened an *Ideas Lab* in its offices in Victoria Street and it was no accident that

the worktops were filled with those little puzzles we can fiddle with whilst working on something else.

- Draw or doodle: yes, even if you can't. Everyone can draw a stick man and others can tell what it is. Some people doodle so they can better listen, and doodling while thinking or working as part of a group on a solution can help access new or forgotten ideas.
- Close your eyes and imagine a number eight lying horizontally across your mind's eye. Trace the shape of the figure and match this to your breath, breathing in on the up strokes and out on the down curves. Activities that work across our bodies and our brains 'wake up' the thinking we don't use every day. Standing and lifting the opposite knee to elbow will also work, but isn't so much one for the self-conscious.
- Mindfulness, or meditation, has been shown to increase creativity and divergent thinking. It also helps with focus and choosing where to direct our thoughts. There are many helpful resources available – a good app to try is at: [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com).

Harnessing this creativity into innovation is the next step and some years ago, an American organisation called The Enterprise Development Group (EDG) shared a couple of frameworks with a number of colleagues (workshop held at The Work Foundation, London, 2007). These frameworks test ideas to see if they're worth developing and suggest a quick and easy path of doing so, which can be used by groups made up of any colleagues or indeed with people from outside of the organisation. The first of the two frameworks, CO-STAR, tests if an idea is worth pursuing. It addresses six key areas which show if the idea 'has legs' or can be dropped (this in itself has been reported as useful by practitioners who then let go of something that's been at the back of their minds for some time) or refined in some way. It helps to stop lots of time and effort being spent travelling in the wrong direction. In workshops, no more than 20 minutes is spent developing the CO-STAR proposition. Of course longer could be spent, but we've found that the results don't significantly improve.

*'To achieve great things, two things are needed; a plan, and not quite enough time' (This quote is generally attributed to Bernstein but no originating source is given)*

Bernstein L

**Figure 1: The elements of CO-STAR:**

<b>Customer</b>	Who are the customers/users and what do they need to be better?
<b>Opportunity</b>	What's the full potential and added opportunity of the proposed innovation?
<b>Solution</b>	What's the solution and how does it meet the need?
<b>Team</b>	Who needs to be on the team - this may change at different stages of the innovation? Consider affiliates and people from outside the organisation who might be useful.

<b>Advantage</b>	What's your compelling advantage over what already exists?
<b>Results</b>	What will the results of your innovation be?

*Source: Gyorffy L, Friedman, L (2012)*

EDG encourage divergent thinking throughout this process. A prototype or model of some sort that catches the essence of the idea proves invaluable in helping the group engage with the idea and improve it in ways that straightforward discussion doesn't always prompt. It also makes best use of the preferred working and communication styles of all in the group. It is not uncommon for these models to then form part of the pitch presentation (see RIIS below) that follows – it saves a lot of words and time.

Once the CO-STAR framework has shown that the idea is one worth pursuing, the process is broadened to include colleagues and others who can be useful for feedback, permission, resources and improvement. The second framework is the Rapid Idea Improvement Session (RIIS). Again, and as the name suggests, this is a quick intervention. This session is to gather feedback to further refine the solution – the process is one of iteration. The owners of the innovation will present their idea, the CO-STAR pitch, to a specially invited group. They consider who they need in the room at this stage and that will depend on what they want from the meeting:

- Is it just for feedback? Often the first session is.
- Is agreement to go ahead being sought?
- Is resource being requested?

They will make a short presentation (typically three minutes long) in which they present their idea using highlights from the CO-STAR concluding with the request: what it is they want from this particular group. If it's a feedback session, an appreciative inquiry approach is used. Gold feedback describes what's really good about this idea and green feedback asks how it could be even better. Feedback is received silently by the innovators. This important step allows the idea to build and be refined in the discussions in the room – no ideas are stupid here, because even flip comments can spark a really helpful suggestion from elsewhere.

Toyota, after introducing these methods, found that over 90 per cent of the suggestions put in the organisation's suggestion boxes were adopted. CO-STAR and RIIS enabled those suggestions which were not going to work to be dropped and those that were the good ideas to be presented in such a way that success was so much more likely.

Organisations using the model are always surprised – and pleased – at how quickly they can make progress with an issue and how rewarding the process is for those taking part. These frameworks provide the necessary structure for play and creative thinking to thrive. They provide guidance that gives those looking to innovate, an arena within

which to do so – making the whole process less daunting and more do-able. To return to where we began, adopting these techniques can give organisations the impetus to making innovation more possible and how to make a start.

*‘When the ingenuity and aspiration of a group are paired with the discipline of innovation, magic happens.’*

Gyorffy L, Friedman L (2012)

## References

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To find out more about the ideas in this article or how IES can help, please contact:

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### IES Annual HR Directors Retreat 2014: The HR Director as Innovator

To find out more about this topic, IES HR Network members can download the documentation and presentations from the event page on our website:  
<http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/2014/hr-directors-retreat-innovation>

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