
How to Tap Employee Creativity

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A new book offers a fresh, inclusive strategy to boosting corporate innovation.

Everyone talks about the importance of innovation to business, but actual nuts-and-bolts primers on how to innovate are not so common. That's the turf carved out by *Innovation to the Core: A Blueprint for Transforming the Way Your Company Innovates*, written by Peter Skarzynski, CEO of the Strategos consulting firm, and Rowan Gibson, a business strategist and author of the best-seller *Rethinking the Future*. In this excerpt, the authors mash-up W. Edwards Deming and Web 2.0 in prescribing a new, inclusive innovation strategy.

What companies seldom seem to recognize is that one of the best ways to get more ideas into the innovation pipeline is to ask for them.

How many of your employees do you regard as innovators? How many regard themselves as innovators? What percentage would tell you that they are fully deploying their creativity on the job every day?

While most companies tell their employees to bring their brains to work, many still limit the use of that brainpower to initiatives aimed at improving operational efficiency. They rarely ask all their people to get involved in imagining new markets or new growth strategies. Instead of tapping into the huge potential for creativity that is latent throughout their organization, too many senior executives continue to view innovation as the exclusive province of one or two specialized departments, such as R&D or new product development.

The problem is rooted in the widespread notion that "ordinary" employees are unlikely to be a source of wealth-creating innovation. Go back a few decades, and we find that a similar prejudice was hindering most American and European companies from achieving dramatically higher levels of quality.

Before the Japanese introduced us to the processes and methods for making quality everyone's job, in most organizations, quality was the responsibility of a very small group of people. We called them "inspectors," and quality was their job.

Then W. Edwards Deming and others came along and said that management should teach first-level employees about statistical process control—that they should unleash people's discretionary decision-making power—and that doing so would deliver a positive return on investment. Thus, the quality movement was born.

If the answer to quality was tapping into the problem-solving skills of rank-and-file employees, why has it taken us so long to figure out that innovation should be approached the same way?

In the past, most employees never had the tools or opportunities to unleash their creativity. Now they do. Armed with new, easy-to-use software tools, workers are proving that they are capable of amazing creativity. So-called ordinary employees are the ones who can make innovation happen, but only if your organization is willing to develop a social architecture that teaches and encourages them to be innovators, that unleashes the power of their imaginations and that supports their innovation efforts in appropriate ways.

The greater the number of employees who regard themselves as innovators, the greater the innovation yield. Set a specific goal. Identify the people in your company who have an innovation role: R&D personnel, product development staff and so on. If this group represents less than 10 percent of the employee base, commit to tripling it over the next 12 months—not by hiring more innovation specialists, but by involving existing employees in innovation processes and events.

Send your employees the message that you expect them to generate new ideas—that innovation is at least part of their job. Then give them the training, the time, the tools and the space they need to exercise their innovation muscles. For every department and business unit, benchmark the percentage of employees who have submitted ideas or participated in innovation events.

Give everyone in your company the opportunity to innovate. If you do, your innovation yields will soar.

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