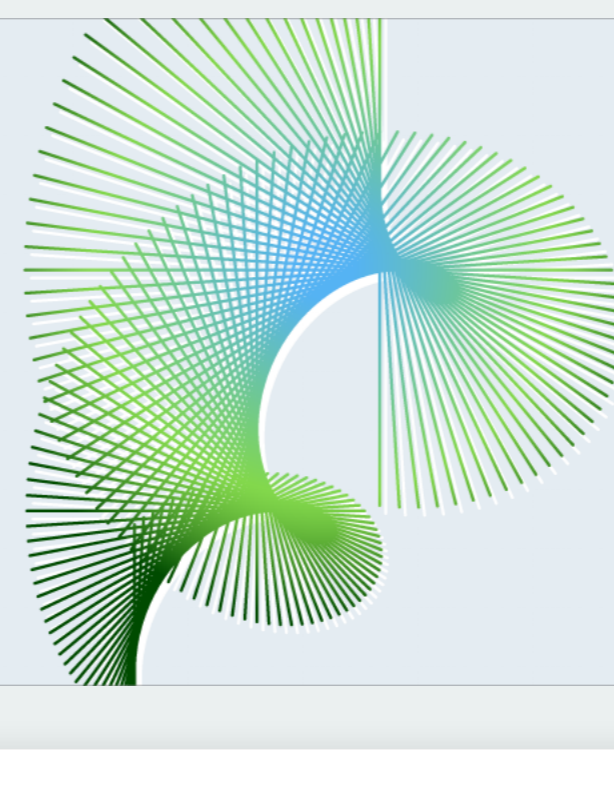


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Innovation

4 Ways to Build an Innovative Team

by Greg Satell

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Summary. Most great innovators are nothing like the stereotype of a mercurial genius. Managers can help the teams they lead become more innovative by doing four things: First, hire for mission. If people care about the problems you're solving, they'll come up with better... [more](#)

One of the most common questions I get asked by senior managers is “How can we find more innovative people?” I know the type they have in mind — someone energetic and dynamic, full of ideas and able to present them powerfully. It seems like everybody these days is looking for an early version of Steve Jobs.

Yet in researching my book, *Mapping Innovation*, I found that most great innovators were nothing like the mercurial stereotype. In fact, almost all of them were kind, generous, and interested in what I was doing. Many were soft-spoken and modest. You would notice very few of them in a crowded room.

So the simplest answer is that you need to start by empowering the people already in your organization. But to do that, you need to take responsibility for creating an environment in which your people can thrive. That's no simple task, and most managers have difficulty with it. Nevertheless, by following a few simple principles you can make a huge difference.

Hire for mission. In my previous company, we had a division manager who wasn't performing the way we wanted her to. She wasn't necessarily bad. In fact, she was well liked by her staff, coworkers, and senior management. But she wasn't showing anywhere near the creativity required to take the business to the next level, and we decided to ease her out of her position.

Then a funny thing happened. After she left our company, she became a successful interior decorator. Her clients loved how she could transform a space with creativity and style. She also displayed many of the same qualities that made her so well liked as a manager. She was a good listener, was highly collaborative, and focused on results.

So why is it that someone could be so dull and unimaginative in one context and so creative in another? The simplest answer is that she was a lot more interested in interior decorating than she was in our business. Researchers have long established that **intrinsic motivation is a major component** of what makes people creative.

The biggest misconception about innovation is that it's about ideas. It's not. It's about **solving problems**. So the first step to building an innovative team is to hire people interested in the problems you need to solve. If there is a true commitment to a shared mission, the ideas will come.

Promote psychological safety. In 2012 Google embarked on an [enormous research project](#). Code-named “Project Aristotle,” the aim was to see what made successful teams tick. The company combed through every conceivable aspect of how teams worked together — how they were led, how frequently they met outside of work, the personality types of the team members — and no stone was left unturned.

However, despite Google's nearly unparalleled ability to find patterns in complex data, none of the conventional criteria seemed to predict performance. In fact, what it found that mattered most to team performance was psychological safety, or the ability of each team member to be able to give voice to their ideas without fear of reprisal or rebuke.

It's not just at Google. Harvard professor Amy Edmondson has documented the importance of psychological safety in a wide variety of contexts, from hospital teams to office furniture manufacturers. She found that it not only promotes a better atmosphere but also increases the capacity for learning and reduces the tendency to go down blind alleys.

Another study, done by researchers at MIT and Carnegie Mellon, found that teams in which people speak in roughly equal amounts far outperform those in which one or two people dominate the conversation. So those mercurial Steve Jobs types who are spouting off ideas so often that nobody can get a word in may in fact be killing innovation.

Interestingly, highly innovative teams can be safe for some ideas, but not for others. For example, two of the scientists at PARC, Dick Shoup and Alvy Ray Smith, developed a revolutionary graphics technology called SuperPaint. Unfortunately, it didn't fit in with PARC's vision of personal computing, the two were ostracized, and eventually both left.

Smith would team up with another graphics pioneer, Ed Catmull, at the New York Institute of Technology. Later they joined George Lucas, who saw the potential for computer graphics to create a new paradigm for special effects. Eventually, the operation was spun out and bought by Steve Jobs. That company, [Pixar](#), was sold to Disney in 2006 for \$7.4 billion.

Create diversity. Many managers hire with a specific “type” in mind, usually people who seem most like themselves. This may be great for creating camaraderie and comfort, but it is not the best environment for solving problems. In fact, [a variety of studies](#) have shown that diverse teams are smarter, more creative, and examine facts more thoroughly.

The problem is that when you narrow the backgrounds, experiences, and outlooks of the people on your team, you are limiting the number of solution spaces that can be explored. At best, you will come up with fewer ideas, and at worst, you run the risk of creating an echo chamber where inherent biases are normalized and reinforced.

In effect, by creating a homogenous team, you are almost guaranteeing that the best answers will be found somewhere else. So instead of looking for comfort, you should be creating an environment where people expect to have their perspectives challenged by someone who looks, talks, and thinks differently.

The challenge for managers is to create an environment that is both diverse and psychologically safe. [Evidence suggests](#) that diversity often reduces cohesion leads to discomfort. Any team can be safe when it is not being challenged. Great innovative teams learn to constructively work through these tensions.

Value teamwork. One of the most surprising — and encouraging — things I found while researching my book was how nice almost everyone I talked to was. Many of the people I spoke to were world-renowned scientists, executives, and entrepreneurs, so I expected to find many to be brash and arrogant, but what I found was just the opposite.

In fact, in almost every case, I found that these superior innovators were friendly, gracious, and showed a genuine interest and desire to help me. Their behavior was so consistent that it couldn't have been an accident. So I did some further research and found that, when it comes to innovation, [generosity can be a competitive advantage](#).

The truth is you don't need the best people — you [need the best teams](#). The problems we face today are far too complex to be solved by a lone genius working in isolation. That's why the best innovators tend to be knowledge brokers, who embed themselves into networks so that they can access that one elusive piece of insight that can crack a tough problem.

So the last thing you want is the prototypical “innovator” personality spouting off a million ideas and breaking all the china. What you do want is people who can collaborate, listen, and build strong networks. The good news is you already have these people in your organization. Don't let them get drowned out.



Greg Satell is Co-Founder of ChangeOS, a transformation & change advisory, an international keynote speaker, and bestselling author of *Cascades: How to Create a Movement that Drives Transformational Change*. His previous effort, *Mapping Innovation*, was selected as one of the best business books of 2017. You can learn more about Greg on his website, [GregSatell.com](#) and follow him on Twitter [@DigitalTonto](#) and on [LinkedIn](#).

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