A New Perspective:

The Factors That Encourage and That Discourage Innovation in Organizations

The frenzied pace of change is the new normal of the work world.

This has made the ability to innovate a matter of business survival. Astute leaders recognize this and know they need to foster a culture that accelerates innovation while rooting out anything that slows it down.

For the **Innovation Beliefs, Practices, and Realities Survey**, researchers at Blanchard posed questions about innovation to executives, managers, and individual contributors. More than 600 people responded, sharing their experiences and providing Blanchard with insight into the state of innovation across organizations and industries.

The structure of the survey looked at the factors that inhibit innovation and the behaviors that promote it.

We will share the ways innovation is depressed or dampened, together with positive recommendations for addressing each area more successfully.

Respondents cited the following organizational factors as being most responsible for slowing innovation:

47% said workload pressure

41% said poor leadership support

34% said fear of failure

32% said a risk-averse culture

Respondents picked these four factors as being most important for accelerating and encouraging innovation:

74% said the freedom to experiment

58% said psychological safety

52% said executive encouragement

47% said clear innovation goals/vision

Organizational Innovation Dampeners

Workload Pressure

Workload pressure was the most cited reason (47%) that people don't innovate. Workload pressure describes the overall pace and expectations that are placed on people. Much has been written about the burnout epidemic going on right now. A key theme being expressed today is how to prioritize when everything is being presented as important. Considering these pressures, employees don't make innovation a priority. Instead, keeping one's head above water and meeting work deadlines are the overriding concerns.

Solution/Accelerator

Focus on current realities and future goals. At the organizational level, improving innovation begins by addressing possible burnout and workload challenges that can make an innovation initiative seem out of touch with the present reality. Encourage conversations about current workloads and priorities. The act of setting a clear innovation goal requires leaders to do some meaningful thinking and clarify what they want their people's focus to be. This is a powerful practice for aligning people on a shared innovation theme.

With that in place, leaders can move forward, providing people with permission, expectations, and a little bit of accountability to work on explicit innovation goals. Demonstrate that innovation matters by building it into work goals. This shows people that innovation is a recognized, company-sanctioned pursuit they should focus on as a part of their regular job, not something they need to do on their own time.

When executives and managers set specific innovation goals, it changes the perspectives of those they lead. Suddenly innovation isn't a vague objective, it is clear and tangible. It isn't an optional distraction that could land them in trouble, it is an expected activity sanctioned from above.

Poor Leadership Support

Poor leadership support (41%) was the second most cited inhibitor to innovation. It covers what executives say, what they do, and, importantly, what they fund. People have very sensitive antennae when it comes to recognizing what is truly important to senior leaders in the organization. They can tell which projects are truly being supported and which are being carried out with minimal attention and resources.

Solution/Accelerator

Demonstrated commitment. It is up to leaders to set the tone for what is expected in the workplace. People who see their leaders embracing innovation initiatives by actively setting goals, checking on progress, and providing day-to-day coaching will feel more confident to venture out and adopt similar behaviors themselves.

If a leader's attention is focused only on short-term goals such as monthly revenue or reporting, they will not be seen as actively supporting their team's innovation behaviors. It's only when a team has established goals on innovation—along with the necessary time, budget, and resources—that they are likely to achieve their objectives.

Where are your leaders focused? What's getting funding in the organization? When executives encourage and fund innovative practices, it goes a long way toward demonstrating commitment.

Fear of Failure

Some 34% of respondents identified fear of failure as a major inhibitor of innovation. Innovation means putting yourself out there. Fear of failure is an insidious and widespread apprehension. If people on the team aren't innovating or are holding back, it's probably because they're afraid of failing. In these situations, people won't take risks, share ideas, or offer contradictory opinions. Their default position becomes one of self-protection.

Solution/Accelerator

Create psychological safety. People need to feel comfortable to disagree, push back, or even complain. Research has shown that people's higher brain function becomes less and less available and even shuts down when they feel threatened. Creative problem-solving, brainstorming, and nonlinear leaps require all parts of the brain to be engaged. And that happens only in situations where there's a high degree of psychological safety, such as when executives actively encourage creativity and risk taking.

Be receptive to new ideas and your people will do the same. View failure as a learning opportunity and they will, too. Encourage risk taking and, in the terminology of Fearless Innovation™, your people will "wonder and wander" in search of doing something in a better way.

A Risk-Averse Culture

The fourth most cited inhibitor to innovation (32%) was a risk-averse culture. While some organizations might have a slower pace of change and adaptation symptomatic of their industry, others may inadvertently create a more stagnant culture through people's collective witnessing of negative treatment of change agents. Regardless of the cause, having a risk-averse culture threatens the innovative viability of the organization with each passing year. It's a problem to be addressed.

Solution/Accelerator

If your culture is risk-averse, you need to face it head on. That means being explicit about the risks and challenges associated with stagnation. If you can openly communicate how avoiding change or risk is more of a threat than embracing it is, you can start to shift the culture.

One way to help build momentum is to encourage experimentation across your business. There is something magical about the concept of experimentation. In organizations where experimentation is encouraged, people start thinking about new and different ways to do things.

Executives can encourage the freedom to experiment by creating inclusive think tanks, running hackathons, and sponsoring innovation projects. Line managers can use agile development methods, design thinking, and other creative approaches to stimulate new ideas. All managers and team leaders can encourage experimentation by showing interest in trying new things and dedicating some meeting time to discussing improvements and learning.

A New Perspective on Innovation

The Innovation Beliefs, Practices, and Realities Survey shows that an enhanced focus on innovation is needed. The ability to shift and evolve is essential to meet the demands of today's extraordinary pace of change. Four new perspectives are required.

Perspective #1

Make Innovation a Clear Priority

- Lighten people's loads

- Work innovation into their schedules

- Clarify innovation goals
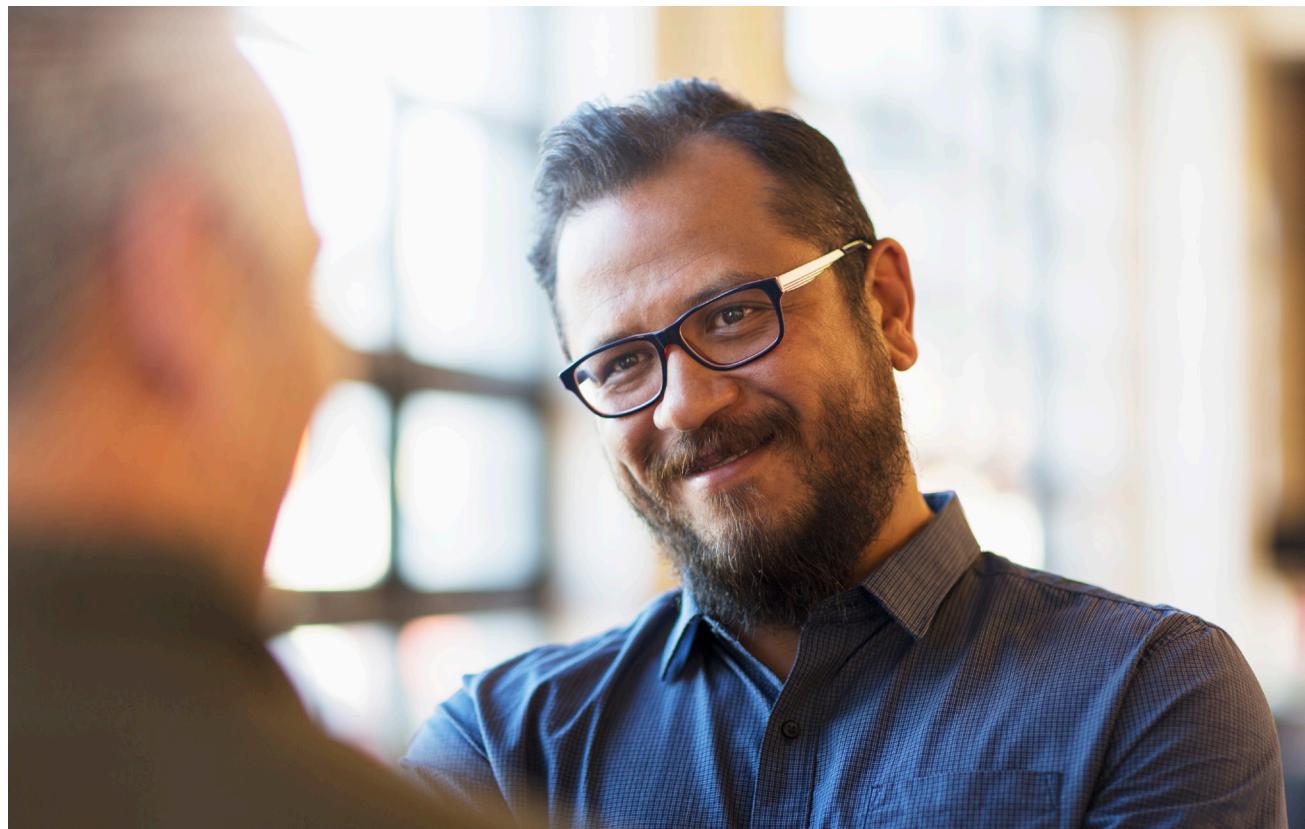
- Focus beyond short-term projects

Think about all the ways that a manager, team leader, or executive can make innovation a real priority. Consider how you can reprioritize work to take a little bit off people's plates, which probably will require focusing beyond short-term goals. Challenge your leaders to have at least one tangible, clear innovation goal on their to-do list.

Offer Encouragement from Above

- Talk up innovation constantly

- Ask people to experiment

- Share experiences

- Put supporting policies in place

Encouragement is like watering your innovation garden. Create an environment where people feel comfortable being creative and trying new things. Consider building the topic of experimentation into weekly team meeting agendas. Ask, "What are you trying this week or this month that you've never tried before?" Open it up to personal pursuits, as well. Invite people to share what they are playing with, what they've learned, and what dead ends they've encountered.

Make It Safe to Innovate

- **Celebrate risk taking**

- **Reframe failing as learning**

- **Role-model innovative behaviors**

- **Thank those who speak up or try**

This is where psychological safety comes in and self-limiting fears can be reduced. When trying to build a culture of innovation, celebrate risk taking and learning along with progress and success. When people see innovators being celebrated whether they win or lose, they reframe failing as learning, because learning is really the goal.

Perspective #4

Communicate Openly

- **Be curious about people's problems and ideas**

- **Listen attentively**

- **Be transparent and informative**

- **Offer candid feedback**

Open and transparent communication includes sharing information, collaborating, and providing feedback. When someone approaches you with feedback, try to listen deeply and let appreciation flow in your first responses. Many people avoid giving feedback since it can be seen as negative. Be thankful and recognize people who go out of their way to speak truth to power or put themselves in a vulnerable position.

Harness the Power of Innovation

The pace of change has reached dizzying speeds. It is only going to increase. But you and your people can keep pace with it by adopting an innovative spirit.

To help accelerate the innovation metabolism in your organization, make innovation a clear priority. Create a safe environment, offer encouragement, and communicate along the way.

Innovation is a natural capability that all human beings have. Why not put all that capability to work across your organization?

Manager Behaviors That Hinder Innovation

The Innovation Beliefs, Practices, and Realities Survey found that managers squelch innovation in their teams in the following ways:

- **Focusing only on short-term goals**
- **Reacting negatively to failure**
- **Being disinterested in creative ideas and feedback**
- **Discouraging risk-taking**

Manager Behaviors That Promote Innovation

The survey found that the most powerful behaviors managers can use to encourage innovation include:

- **Attentively listening to new ideas**
- **Offering time/resources dedicated to innovation**
- **Encouraging experimentation**
- **Giving people autonomy to try new things**

Team Behaviors That Hinder Innovation

The Innovation Beliefs, Practices, and Realities Survey found that innovation is hindered in teams by the following:

- **Pressing deadlines/time constraints**

- **Low psychological safety**

- **Low conversational capacity**

- **Risk avoidance**

Team Behaviors That Promote Innovation

The survey found that the most powerful behaviors teams can use to encourage innovation include:

- **Collaborating and sharing information**

- **Being willing to change/take risks**

- **Communicating openly**

- **Providing feedback/constructive criticism**

Empower everyone to be innovators.

Contact us today to learn how we can help you cultivate a culture of innovation that accelerates your business growth.

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Learn more on how you can adopt a fearless mindset to drive innovation efforts.

Explore these additional complimentary resources and tools on building a culture of innovation:

WEBINAR

4 Keys to Creating a Culture of Innovation

BLOG

3 Questions to Ask If You're Serious about Innovation