

Best Practices Are Stupid



40 Ways

to Out-Innovate

the Competition

Stephen M. Shapiro

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Portfolio Penguin

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Scheduled release: September 29, 2011

This pre-release copy is unedited. This manuscript is subject to significant change and should not be quoted.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
INNOVATE THE WAY YOU INNOVATE.....	7
1. Not Survival of the Fittest – Survival of the Adaptable	8
2. How Can You Avoid Becoming a One-Hit Wonder?	11
3. Asking for Ideas Is a Bad Idea.....	14
4. Don't Think Outside the Box; Find a Better Box.....	17
5. Expertise Is the Enemy of Innovation	20
PROCESS: CHALLENGE-DRIVEN INNOVATION	23
6. The Difference Between a Pipeline and Sewer is what Flows Through It.....	24
7. The Goldilocks Principle.....	27
8. There Is No Such Thing as a “Know It All”	30
9. What Did Edison Get Wrong About Innovation?	34
10. What Do Cisco, LG Electronics, and GE Have in Common with American Idol?	37
11. To Compete or Not Compete: That is the Question	40
12. Crowds are Better at Eliminating Duds Than Picking Winners.....	43
STRATEGY: INNOVATION STRATEGY AND CUSTOMERS	46
13. Lessons from Indiana Jones ®	47
14. Your Market Research Sucks	49
15. Be the Aspirin for Your Customers’ Pains.....	51
16. Innovate Where You Differentiate	55
17. Ever Notice How One Size Fits All Never Really Fits All?	58
18. Best Practices Are (Sometimes) Stupid.....	61
19. Simplification is the Best Innovation	63
MEASURES: INNOVATION MEASURES AND MOTIVATION	65
20. Motivate Like Maslow.....	66
21. You Get What You Measure, But Will You Get What You Want?	70
22. The Performance Paradox.....	73
23. Time Pressure Kills Creativity.....	77
24. Failure Is Always an Option.....	79
25. Objectivity is in the Eye of the Beholder	82
PEOPLE: ORGANIZATION, LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE.....	84
26. Hire People You Don't Like	85
27. Why the Pyramids Are One of the Seven Wonders	88
28. The “Top-Down” Philosophy Should be Left to Convertibles	91
29. Use the Reality TV Show Model	93
30. Get Your Knowledge Workers Doing Knowledge Work.....	95
CREATIVITY: TECHNIQUES FOR STIMULATING CREATIVE THINKING	98
31. Encourage Employees to Get On Their Soapbox.....	99
32. The Shortest Distance Between Two Points is a Straight Line	101
33. Someone Else Has Already Solved Your Problem.....	104
34. Adapt Your Product to a Different Environment	107
35. Don't put the “No” in InNOvation.....	108

36. How Can You Make the Impossible, Possible?.....	109
37. Stand in Someone Else’s Shoes	111
38. Innovation is Child’s Play	112
39. Sometimes It’s Logical to be Illogical	114
40. Be Proactive: Predict What the Competition Will Do Next	116
APPENDICES	118
Technologies that Enable Innovation	119
Discover Your Innovation Style.....	120

INTRODUCTION

On April 20, 2010 the environment was dealt a horrific blow. On that day, the Deepwater Horizon oilrig exploded, spewing as much as 180 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf Coast of the United States. It took 87 days to cap the gushing wellhead.

In the weeks following the explosion, scientists, movie stars, and concerned citizens tried to devise ways to slow the flow. But workable solutions were hard to find and implement, as the well was nearly a mile below the surface of the ocean. Repeated attempts failed.

In an effort to find better solutions, the Deepwater Horizon Unified Command, spearheaded by BP, launched a website where anyone could submit their ideas in an online suggestion box. According to USA Today, the website received nearly 125,000 ideas; 80,000 suggestions had to do with plugging the leak and 43,000 on ways to clean up the oil.

Of these ideas, 100 were deemed as having some merit and a couple dozen were tested.

On the surface, this might appear to have been a successful endeavor; BP was able to gather lots of possible ideas to help end the disaster.

For a company that stood to lose billions of dollars in cleanup costs, relief payouts, and lost sales due to bad publicity, this approach might indeed have been a good strategy.

But the resources necessary to respond to this type of disaster typically don't exist within most organizations. Although a workable solution may have been found using this strategy, it is unclear if that was the case. Regardless, consider how many people it would take to evaluate thousands of ideas. If one person could evaluate an idea in 30 seconds (which is optimistic, especially for a technically complex issue like this) and could dedicate 40 hours a week to the task, it would take over a half a year to evaluate that many submissions, a significant investment for any company.

With an innovation strategy like this, finding a useful idea is like finding a needle in a haystack. Or more accurately, it is like finding a needle in a stack of other needles.

Unfortunately, this innovation strategy is what many well-intentioned companies use in their quest to be more innovative. They operate under the misguided belief that getting more ideas leads to better innovation. Organizations that use this approach spend a lot of their time sorting the wheat from the chaff. And sadly, most of the ideas are chaff.

As this book will reveal, you don't want more ideas. You want to focus your energies on finding solutions to pressing problems that enable your company to be more innovative. In fact, I'll teach you why the key to innovating *successfully* involves innovating *efficiently*.

The popular press and innovation gurus alike often provide well-worn examples that muddy the waters on how to approach the innovation process.

Google reportedly lets its employees use 20 percent of their time to develop new ideas. "PhDs and other smarty pants agreed to hand over their brains to the search giant for four days of the week and, in return, they were given the fifth to work on any project of their fancy." Many experts hold this up as an effective way to innovate. In actuality, this investment was designed to help Google win the "war for talent," and did little in the way of generating new revenue streams. In spite of the huge investment, 97% of their revenues still come from advertising, the same way they have always made money.

3M uses a similar strategy, giving employees 15% of their time to explore. When discussing the 15% rule, someone from 3M once told me, "Which 15%? I work 60 hours a week and there's no time for my 15%." The answer appears to involve working weekends, as Les Krogh, retired senior vice president of Research and Development once said, "If 3Mers have to get something done, they'll do it. They'll take their 15 percent on Saturdays or Sundays, if need be."

Admittedly, their approach has indeed produced some amazing innovations. But will this strategy work for your organization? Both Google and 3M benefit from a highly motivated workforce that is probably more ambitious than employees in most organizations.

So is there a more efficient way for you to innovate?

Allowing employees to dedicate 15% to 20% of their time on the innovation efforts of their choosing is akin to the infinite monkey theorem: if you give an infinite amount of monkeys an infinite number of typewriters, they would eventually write *War and Peace*. The belief is that if you give employees enough time to tinker around and develop enough harebrained ideas, they will eventually find the next big innovation (and no, I am not suggesting that your employees are monkeys).

Although this might yield new ideas, it is hardly an efficient way to innovate.

Let's face it, the old models of innovation are broken, inefficient, and fail to produce results.

It's time for you to be innovative about the way you innovate and apply some new thinking to your innovation process.

This book is comprised of forty tips designed to help you do just that. These tips are designed to help you innovate differently. Innovate more efficiently. Innovate in a more focused manner.

Some tips are intended to change the way you think about innovation. Others are designed to change how you innovate. Depending on your experience level, you may already be familiar with some tips, while others will be new concepts for even the most advanced innovation practitioners. Certain tips are mainly useful at an organizational level, while others are important concepts for all individuals to consider.

In some cases, you may not agree with my point of view. That's ok! The objective of each tip is to get you and your team thinking. You don't necessarily need to take what I say at face value. Challenge each concept. Discuss them. See how they apply to your organization. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for innovation. Pick and choose the tips that will have the greatest impact.

Although the tips are organized in a logical sequence, they can be read in any order and each stands on its own. The first series of tips introduce some of the most important concepts relating to "innovating the way you innovate," and the remainder of the book is loosely organized around the components of innovation capability: process, strategy, measures, people, and technology:

- **Process:** Most innovation efforts are ineffective and unfocused. To remedy this, you will be introduced to challenge-driven innovation, an efficient process for solving your most pressing issues and opportunities.
- **Strategy:** If you don't understand your customer's latent desires, your innovation effort will be comparable to a wild goose chase. Armed with their true wants and needs, you can develop a powerful innovation strategy.
- **Measures:** Your measurement systems may inadvertently be killing your innovation efforts. By making some simple changes to your motivation strategy, you can stimulate creativity and foster innovation.
- **People:** Innovation is dependent on having the right people – with divergent points of view - in the right roles. The key is to treat each individual like an owner of the business, pushing decision making to the lowest levels of the organization.
- **Creativity:** One aspect of the people dimension is competency. With innovation, one specific competency involves the ability to develop creative solutions. Therefore, although it is not a separate component of a capability, given its importance, I have dedicated an entire section

techniques for generating new ideas and new solutions. These can be used in brainstorming sessions or as instructional aids for helping people be more creative. Although creativity is technically part of the “people” dimension of the innovation capability, given its importance, I have dedicated a section to these techniques.

- **Technology:** Technology plays a critical important in finding solutions to challenges and enabling collaboration. Although this is a distinct component of the innovation capability, the world of technology is changing so rapidly. Therefore anything written in a book would be immediately obsolete. Therefore, this Appendix TK contains an overview of the technology landscape with the most up-to-date information found on our website.

I am always amazed by the high quality of people employed by companies around the world. I am even more amazed by how little most companies tap into the innovative potential of these employees. This book provides dozens of proven tips and techniques that will enable you to get the most out of your workforce.

Innovation is the key to long-term growth. Although many companies are enamored with utilizing best practices, as this book’s title suggests, duplicating what others are already doing relegates you to a continuous game of catch-up. Following in the footsteps of others is the fastest way to irrelevancy. Instead, create your own path. Find new and creative ways of staying ahead of the competition. Only through repeated, rapid, and efficient change can an organization survive and thrive in today’s volatile marketplace.

INNOVATE THE WAY YOU INNOVATE

Before diving into the specifics of the innovation capability, let's review some key innovation concepts. Not everyone will share my point of view in this section. That's expected as these tips challenge the "conventional wisdom" that dominates popular thought. However, the high failure rate of most innovation efforts tells us that these conventional approaches may not be so wise after all. Ready? Let's get started.

1. Not Survival of the Fittest – Survival of the Adaptable

Have you heard the one about two men who are hiking through the mountains of Canada? The story goes that after stumbling upon a hungry, 600-pound grizzly bear, one of the hikers takes off his backpack and his hiking boots and proceeds to put on his running shoes. The other hiker looks at him and asks, “What are you doing? You can’t outrun a bear!” The first hiker responds, “I know, but I only need to outrun you!”

This story highlights the essence of innovation. Innovation is not about new products, new processes, new services, new business models, or even new ideas. It is about staying one step ahead of your competition so that you are not eaten. Let’s face it; there are a lot of hungry competitors out there. And when you are trying to outpace the bear (your current competition), you need to make sure you don’t run into an alligator or a tiger (your new competition).

Innovation is about change. Not a one time change but ongoing change. It is about adaptability, flexibility, and agility.

Consider this...

When the pace of change outside your organization is greater than the pace of change within, you will be eaten and have a tough time keeping your business afloat. And as you know, the pace of change outside of your organization is faster than ever.

The *only* way to survive is to stop treating innovation as a one-time event. Innovation must be a continuous, never ending process. The second you rest on your laurels, you can be certain that someone will catch you for breakfast.

But the story of the two hikers does not end with the first hiker saying, “I only need to outrun you.” It continues with the second hiker saying, “Go ahead and try,” and then he stands perfectly still as the first hiker takes off. The second hiker smiles because he knows that bears have poor eyesight and will only chase prey that runs away. The first hiker gets eaten. The second hiker reflects on the importance of understanding the hunting habits of large carnivores – and of choosing friends wisely.

The moral of the story is that, although organizations want to speed up their innovation efforts and move quickly, running in the wrong direction can actually slow you down and burn valuable resources. Instead,

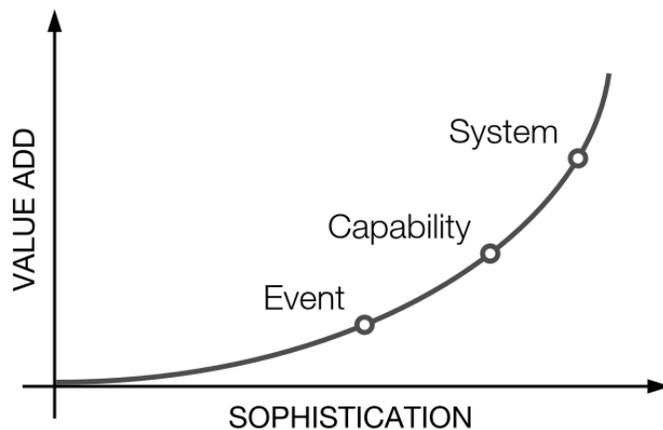
take deliberate action. Know what will improve your business. Understand the marketplace and harness the energies of your organization by focusing on what is most important.

And yes, pick your friends - and colleagues - wisely. The people you choose as your innovation partners is an important part of your innovation strategy.

So, what can an organization do to not get eaten by the competition?

The Three Levels of Innovation

The answer to that lies in a basic understanding of the three levels of innovation.



Level 1: Innovation as an Event: This is where most companies find themselves. They conduct brainstorming sessions or hold random contests to generate new ideas. If a good idea is produced, there is some value added to the organization. In some cases, the idea may even lead to tremendous value (such as 3M's invention of Post-it Notes). However, there is generally a huge amount of work that needs to happen between idea generation and its realization.

Level 2: Innovation as a Capability: This is the next level of sophistication. The organization puts in place structures and processes to define problems, generate and evaluate solutions, and develop action plans to implement those solutions. The result is a realistic deliverable based on an organizational challenge or opportunity.

Level 3: Innovation as a System: The ultimate level involves creating an environment where innovation is embedded in everything you do. At both the event- and capability-driven levels, innovation tends to be reactionary and discrete. It is somewhat separate from the business. With embedded innovation, people

not only innovate to deal with “problems or challenges” that are presented to them, but with everything they do. They continuously, even radically, improve their products, processes, and organization. This creates exponential and ongoing value.

Where do you begin?

The first step is to create an environment where creativity is encouraged and where solutions are implemented in response to specific challenges. This is Level 2: innovation as a repeatable process and capability. In fact, a large portion of this book is dedicated to helping organizations achieve that level. Once this is mastered, you can more easily move on to innovation as a system: the Holy Grail of innovation.

Too often, organizations send employees to creativity classes. When these individuals return, they are excited about generating new ideas. Unfortunately, they are confronted with an environment that stifles creativity and innovation. They are told to keep their heads down and their mouths shut. There is no vehicle for tapping into their new creative energies. They become disgruntled and frustrated. Now you have a bigger morale problem. Creative ideas without an encouraging innovation environment lead to employee dissatisfaction. An overall shift towards a culture of innovation must be put in place before people can be trained to be creative thinkers.

Although people believe that Darwin suggested that it is the survival of the fittest, his perspective on “natural selection” was that it is not physical shape but rather the ability to adapt that is critical.

This is the goal of innovation. The smartest organization will not survive. The company with the most money can quickly fall from grace. But the organization that adapts and evolves to address ever-changing market conditions will thrive in the long run.

2. How Can You Avoid Becoming a One-Hit Wonder?

Do you know the bands Lipps Inc, The Sugar Hill Gang, or Haddaway? You might know the song that each of these artists made famous: Funky Town, Rapper's Delight, and What is Love, respectively. These artists were "one-hit wonders." They climbed to the top of the music charts once and were never heard from again.

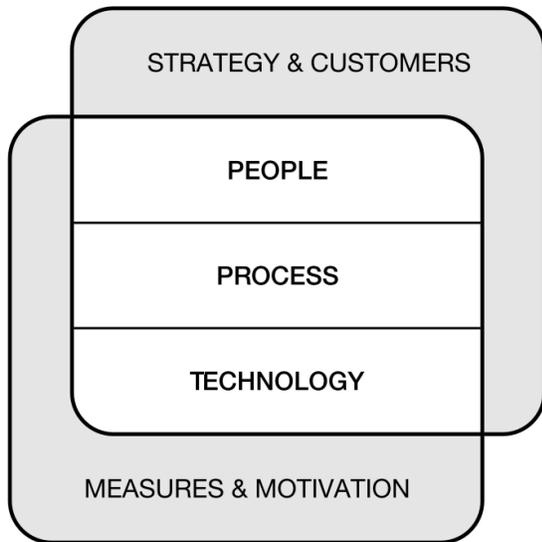
This is not too dissimilar to what happens with many businesses. They generate one good idea to gain momentum but quickly fall from grace. What can you do to prevent your organization from becoming a one-hit wonder? Make sure that your innovation efforts are predictable and sustainable by treating them like any other capability in your company.

As an example, think about your organization's finance capability. It has skilled experts (e.g., CPAs), measures (e.g., Days Sales Outstanding), supporting technology (e.g., Oracle or SAP), processes (e.g., processes for closing the books at year end), an owner (the CFO), and a strategy. Your innovation capability requires all of these elements, and more, including skilled innovation experts, innovation measures, innovation management technologies, an innovation process, an innovation "owner," and a clearly articulated innovation strategy.

With these pieces in place, you can begin to make innovation a repeatable and predictable process where creativity is encouraged throughout the organization and the best solutions are implemented. This is the second level of innovation described in the previous tip: "innovation as a capability."

Five key components are required for successful long-term innovation:

Strategy: A strategy is needed to decide when, where and how innovation will be used within the organization. Most importantly, it should address “why” you want innovation. Are you looking primarily for a new pipeline of products? Do you want to serve your customers better? Are you looking to create a more nimble, flexible, and adaptable organization? For one company, the mantra for innovation was “2x10” - to become a \$2 billion business by 2010. This made it clear to all employees why innovation is needed and what it means to deliver innovative ideas. Another company is solely



focused on their customers with the mantra, “Innovation is anything that makes the lives of our customers better.”

Measures: Innovation, as with any capability, needs to be measurable and measured. You will want to measure the value of your innovation pipeline. Who will be measured? What kinds of measures will be used? How will you measure less tangible values such as adaptability? How will you relate innovation to overall business outcomes and results?

Process: Innovation requires an end-to-end model for targeting, generating, selecting, and implementing innovative solutions. As you will discover, the recommended innovation process is one that starts with a challenge and ends with value created for the organization.

People: Your people are your culture. If you want a culture of innovation, your employees must embrace actions, values, beliefs, skills, and language that are consistent with this objective. Everyone, at all levels, must appreciate divergent points of view. Creativity must be encouraged and valued. And you need the right organization and leadership models in place.

Technology: Innovative companies use collaboration tools to enable communication between employees, customers, suppliers, and external experts. Solutions are captured in ways that facilitate the dissemination and replication of innovative thinking. These technologies enable communication at all levels, across all organizations, and across business boundaries.

You will notice that this book is, for the most part, organized around each of these components, providing even greater detail on how to implement an innovation capability in your organization.

For too long, innovation has been relegated to the darkest recesses of Research and Development (R&D) departments and to the conference rooms of well-meaning brainstormers. But now is the time to bring innovation to the forefront of your business. Now is the time to make innovation a capability with the same level of status as finance, sales, or marketing. Doing this will prevent your innovation efforts from becoming a one-hit wonder.

3. Asking for Ideas Is a Bad Idea

A large European retail bank that was suffering from eroding market share thought they had a great idea to solve this emerging problem. They decided to get input from all of their employees with ways to improve and grow the business. In order to collect employee ideas, they implemented an enterprise-wide electronic suggestion box. They believed that this would help them tap into previously undiscovered innovations. Sounds like a great idea, right? Wrong!

They received thousands of ideas. Evaluators looked at every one and in the end, none were implemented. The company's entire innovation program lasted a total of 18 months at which point it was shut down and deemed a huge failure.

In an attempt to be more innovative, many companies start by asking their employees for their ideas. This is a bad idea! The ideas that are submitted tend to be impractical and of low value and end up only creating an overwhelming amount of unproductive clutter in the system.

This points to one of the most important, yet under-considered measures in the innovation process: the "signal-to-noise ratio."

The signal-to-noise ratio is an engineering term that is used to quantify how much a signal is corrupted by noise. For example, in an audio recording, the signal is the music and the noise is any background hiss. A higher ratio indicates more signal than noise, which is the ultimate goal. Many online discussion forums use the term to describe the ratio between useful information and spam or false/irrelevant information.

This latter use of the term is the one that best applies to innovation.

In innovation, the signal is comprised of solutions that are implemented and create value. The noise is made up of all of the ideas that never come to fruition, and the useless suggestions for problems that don't matter and don't create value.

To increase your innovation's signal-to-noise ratio, the first thing you want to do is stop asking for ideas.

Suggestion boxes are cluttered with noise and the amount of time required to sift through bad ideas to get to the gold is huge. Even when you do find a good suggestion, the amount of effort required to rally the troops to implement the idea can be significant.

In the aftermath of the bank's innovation efforts, I was asked to do a post-mortem assessment of what went wrong. In going through the submissions, I found that the ideas could be categorized into three broad groups:

Duds: A large percentage of the ideas were clearly not worth pursuing. They were not new, or were unlikely to show a positive ROI. There might have been a nugget of usefulness among these suggestions that was missed. However the energy to nurture these nuggets was probably not worth the effort.

False Negatives: These were good ideas. But for whatever reason, the evaluators dismissed them. Part of it had to do with the biases of the evaluators and sometimes it was due to a lack of knowledge on their part. Often times it was because the ideas were not fully developed, making it difficult for them to be properly judged.

Good Idea, No Home: This was the most disconcerting category. These were the good ideas that the evaluators liked, but sadly they had no organizational home or strategy for implementing them. As a result, the ideas withered on the vine and were never used. They never got the resources or funding necessary to move them to the next level.

The bank's experience is not unique among organizations. A well-known software company had an "idea program" that generated tens of thousands of suggestions. Less than a dozen proved to have any value and the program was completely scrapped.

One large retailer is known for holding a well-publicized competition each year where employees (and in some cases customers) submit new product ideas. The winner gets a large check and the company implements the best idea. I asked the person responsible for this program if it was a success. He thought about it a moment and responded, "It was a PR success, but a commercial failure." The competition generated buzz in the media, but none of the products ever generated a positive return on investment.

While the company's idea-based competitions did not generate good bottom-line results, their programs that focused on solving specific product improvement opportunities were a huge commercial success. The fact that this company recently stopped running their annual idea competition gives you an idea of how much value those innovative ideas brought to the company.

The other problem with asking for ideas is that there is no level of accountability. Because people tend to develop ideas on their own time, there are no tracking methods that can keep tabs on how much energy is invested in idea generation. If you encourage ideas, you are probably spending more money on those

initiatives than you could ever imagine. You might be able to measure the ROI of a specific winning idea, but it is difficult to determine the ROI of your overall idea-based program. There is no way to know how much time was spent on the thousands of duds that never see the light of day.

My suggestion? Throw out your suggestion box!

Organizations are often enamored with collecting a large number of ideas from employees and customers. And although these can be useful for employee morale, if you go down this path, your organization needs to make sure to implement enough of the ideas to keep enthusiasm high. Unfortunately, the lack of traction gained by most idea platforms hurts morale and leaves the organization with a lot of extra work.

If you have an infinite amount of resources, time, and money, then the idea-driven approach can be useful for finding hidden gems.

But sometimes the best idea is to stop asking for ideas.

Technologies that Enable Innovation

Up to this point, this book contains tips on how to leverage your innovation process, strategy, people, and measures. However, in today's fast-paced world, technology has become an important enabler of the entire innovation process and a number of software platforms exist to help facilitate this.

Functionality varies from platform to platform. Some of these software products allow management to define specific challenges and then look for solutions, while others are particularly useful for gathering ideas and customer insights. Some tools enable voting and evaluation, while others use more sophisticated "predictive markets." And some are best for internal collaboration, while others are optimized for external crowdsourcing.

Each tool has its own strengths and associated limitations.

Here are a few players in the collaborative innovation space (in alphabetical order):

- BrightIdea (www.brightidea.com)
- Hype (www.hypeinnovation.com)
- Imaginatik (www.imaginatik.com)
- InnoCentive (www.innocentive.com)
- Jive (www.jivesoftware.com)
- Salesforce.com's "Ideas" (www.salesforce.com/crm/customer-service-support/ideation)
- Spigit (www.spigit.com)

Other products exist that serve different purposes. For example, Invention Machine's Goldfire (www.inventionmachine.com) helps automate common innovation tasks while ThoughtOffice (www.thoughtrod.com) improves brainstorming.

Because the technology landscape is changing so rapidly, putting anything in a printed book would be outdated by the time it hits the bookstores. Therefore, I created a page with the latest and greatest links to tools and other products that enable innovation. You can find it at TK.

Discover Your Innovation Style

In the tip “Hire People You Don’t Like,” the need for divergent points of view was discussed. And in particular, I suggested that you should build teams with representation from every innovation style. If you are missing even one, your innovation efforts will suffer.

Below is a simple spreadsheet that can help you quickly assess the innovation style of each person on your team. You can download a copy of this from our website (www.TK.com)

For each row, rank the words from most like you to least like you:

1 = most like you, 2 = next, 3 = next, 4 = least like you

For example, if you are very adventurous but not goal-oriented, this is how you might rank the first row:

Intellectual 3	Adventurous 1	Goal-Oriented 4	Cheerleader 2
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<u>Column A</u>	<u>Column B</u>	<u>Column C</u>	<u>Column D</u>
Intellectual	Adventurous	Goal-Oriented	Cheerleader
Expert	Spontaneous	Driven	Diplomatic
Knowledgeable	Daring	Decisive	Sociable
Philosophical	Flexible	Direct	Gregarious
Discerning	Versatile	Competitive	Popular
Analytical	Creative	Disciplined	Nurturing
Logical	Visionary	Organized	Empathetic
Data Driven	Open Minded	Structured	Compassionate
Realistic	Insightful	Systematic	Loyal
Rational	Curious	Methodical	Considerate
Total	Total	Total	Total

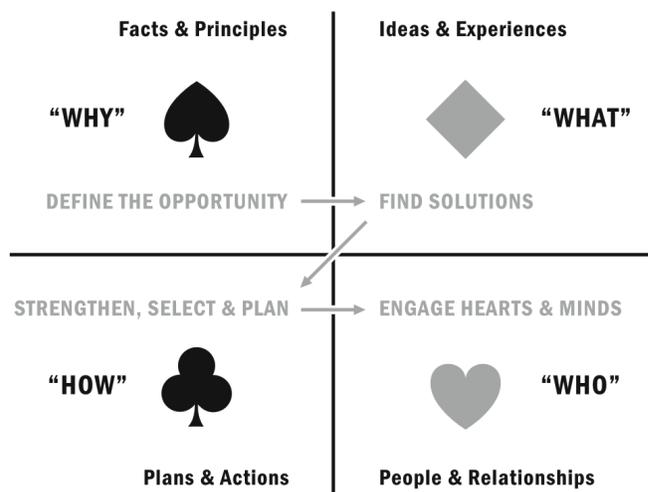
Turn to the next page to score your assessment and determine your style.

Scoring Your Innovation Style Quiz

To score, add the columns. The column with the **LOWEST** score is your style.

- If column A is the lowest, you are analytical and are driven by “facts”
- If column B is the lowest, you like to generate “creative ideas and new experiences”
- If column C is the lowest, you prefer “plans and actions”
- If column D is the lowest, your focus is on “people”

Those from columns A and C are often called “left-brained” and are typically “dot” thinkers (see tip TK). They are great at challenging ideas and helping to drive towards solutions that are implementable and will add value. The risk is that these individuals can stifle innovation by over-challenging during the divergent stages of innovation.



Those from columns B and D referred to as “right-brained” and are typically “line” thinkers as they are masterful at connecting dots. They are great at developing new concepts and engaging others in the process. The risk is that they may get lost in creativity for creativity sake; or they may worry about how others will feel, at the expense of powerful business solutions.

The innovation process goes from A to B to C to D. And although every style plays some role in each step, each style is best suited for one step in particular.

- Define the Challenge – best performed by the data-driven “As”
- Generate Solutions – the “Bs” can help develop creative solutions
- Plan & Execute – the methodical and goal-oriented “Cs” will ensure progress
- Engage the Hearts & Minds – the relationship-oriented “Ds” can rally employees and customers so that everyone buys in and implements the solutions.

Each style is critical to the innovation process.

Go to www.PersonalityPokerBook.com to learn more about our Personality Poker® card game. This will give you an even more accurate assessment of your team and it done in a highly interactive, collaborate, and fun way.

For those of you who have already played Personality Poker®, the columns map to the suits as follows:

- Column A = Spades
- Column B = Diamonds
- Column C = Clubs
- Column D = Hearts