

We can all be innovative leaders: how to unlock your potential

When we think of change and innovation, we often think of big organisational projects. The high-speed train line, HS2, or novel inventions such as the Dyson Air Multiplier bladeless fans, might spring to mind.

We also know that big projects often don't go to plan and rarely produce the expected or promised outcomes. Most of us consider inventions to be the realm of other people and require a level of creativity that we can't directly relate to.

However, we often have more agency to instigate and implement change and innovation than we think. We can sometimes forget that entrepreneurial thinking isn't just for entrepreneurs. In order to tap into our own capacity for innovation and creativity, it might be necessary to change our way of thinking.



We're all surrounded by opportunities for change and innovation

Add innovation to your leader's toolkit

The first assumption people often make is the capacity to be innovative is restricted to particular people. In fact, the capacity to think and practice in innovative ways can be developed and incorporated into any leader's toolkit. All leaders can think and practice innovation, not just "innovators". Innovation is a practice, not an occupation or identity.

To practice innovation and change when appropriate, we need to see ourselves as having the capability to do so. We need to believe that we can and the onus is on us to initiate action when required. We need to be the "pilot in the plane" to quote one of [Sarasvathy's effectual principles](#).

However, the self-belief and intention to take ownership for

initiating change is not enough, we've got to be the ones to take action and make the first move. This requires a risk to be taken. Action is required even when we're not entirely sure and don't feel we have enough information, or the information we do have is not clear.

Rather than start with a problem, or expect to come up with an original idea, often the best place to start is with what we've already got, from where we find ourselves. We're all surrounded by opportunities for change and innovation, as well as the means to realise them. It's just a question of spotting and creating opportunity.



Take action and tap into your leadership potential

Making innovation collaborative

Another common pitfall many leaders make is to conceive an

idea and then work on it in isolation. Often we don't involve the people who are needed to make it work, who will be most affected by it, or who have the potential to resist or block it. Only other people can define and perceive the value that we're attempting to create. The stakeholders of the change need to be part of the team from the beginning.

By downgrading our own opinions, and upgrading the opinions of others, the risk of misguided investments of time and money will be reduced. It means that we can co-create change at every step. We only invest as much as we're prepared to lose and prepare to adapt our ideas in response to the information we are generating.

A culture where it's understood that no one gets it right all the time is a prerequisite to innovation and change. When an experiment doesn't give a scientist the result they were expecting, they don't call it a failure. It's just a different result. Performing artists have a word for it, it's called rehearsing.

The practice of iterative experimentation not only generates useful information, but it is also important for the rest of the organisation to feel part of the change and understand it, get involved with it, and influence the direction it moves in.

When we reconceive change and innovation as this collection of ways of thinking and practicing that can be developed by anyone and practiced in any context, the next challenge is to judge when change is appropriate and when it's not. And that's really what differentiates effective leaders of change and innovation.

About the author

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ways of thinking and explore how more entrepreneurial aspects of organisational culture might be developed in larger corporations.

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