

## **How can we encourage innovation, and give everyone the opportunity to contribute, in an environment of ‘doing more with less’?**

This question would resonate in every boardroom, perhaps particularly:

- In the public sector, where budgets are being drastically squeezed
- In the third sector, where any money not spent on ‘the cause’ is subject to scrutiny
- In SMEs, where funding may be precarious and growth depends on innovation
- In any company that is struggling to compete, perhaps even survive.

### **What are the barriers to innovation?**

1. The word itself – it can be daunting to some, who could feel they are being asked to dream up new products or understand complicated technology.
2. Innovation can be risky, because a lot of new product ideas, and new ways of working, fail. People need to be allowed to ‘mess up’, but some organisations are risk averse because ‘messaging up’ can have really bad consequences. Think about a hospital surgeon, for example, or a technician at a nuclear power station.
3. People don’t always want to be involved, preferring to get on with the day job, assume someone else is taking ownership, and not stick their head above the parapet. Shifting people from just ‘doing the day job’ to ‘doing the day job better’ is much harder than it sounds.
4. Some people are really hard-bitten and cynical, and can dampen even the most enthusiastic people’s spirits.
5. Organisations are really good at giving out mixed messages around values, purpose, goals etc. People quite reasonably ask, how can we innovate and improve if we don’t know what we stand for and where we’re going?
6. The physical environment can be innovation-averse, with people separated by partitions and funnelled into fixed walkways and tunnels. This is very discouraging to free association.

### **So what can be done?**

1. In fact, everyone can contribute something, maybe something as simple as making a process a little more efficient. Innovation doesn’t have to mean Big Ideas. It’s also important to capitalise on everyone’s skills – some are good at coming up with ideas, some at evaluating these, while others have the skills to bring them to fruition. Decode ‘innovation’ so everyone feels they have a part to play. This might mean calling it ‘improvement’, or ‘process efficiency’, or ‘delivering effectively to customers’ – whatever people can understand, and feel they can contribute to. Give examples of small things people might be able to do, and ensure everyone knows about successes and the people that were involved.

2. Know when to follow the rules, maybe even when 'command and control' might be needed. In some environments, it isn't possible to have complete freedom to try things out – so a different approach might be needed, for example to reflect after the event about doing it better and differently next time.
3. Encourage and recognise people to speak up. This means having a genuine culture of openness (where whistle-blowing is rewarded rather than being penalised) and line managers who actively encourage suggestions for improvement and an 'appreciative enquiry' mentality within the team. Help anxious managers to get started by suggesting they could set their team a challenge or two, for example to come up with ways of doing a process better or more quickly. Innovation must be led from the top, by leaders who trust their people. However, HR and T&D have a role here too – encouraging the recruitment and retention of people who are comfortable with change and new ideas, emphasising openness during induction programmes, ensuring any behavioural competencies are in line with innovative behaviour, and promoting learning about systems thinking, problem-solving and appreciative enquiry.
4. Bring hard cases round by tying in innovation to something that means something to them – increasing their ROI, for example, or raising their personal profile. You could also try buddying them with an enthusiastic colleague on a piece of work. An element of competition can work, too – no-one wants their team to fall behind, especially when they see others being recognised for their efforts. Always feed back when people have put forward an idea, even if the feedback is that the idea won't be implemented – cynical people are often those whose original passion has been chipped away by years of being ignored.
5. The motivation of individuals to participate in ideas-generation and improvement can be helped hugely if there is clarity around the strategic narrative and purpose. Such clarity will also help to frame the requirement for innovation – ie what the organisation expects from individuals and teams.
6. It doesn't take a lot of investment to do away with physical barriers and open up some spaces where people can meet, talk and exchange ideas. If space really is at a premium, trust people to go to the workplace cafeteria, or even off-site, for discussions and team meetings.