

4 KEY FACTORS OF SUCCESSFUL INNOVATION

First, if a new program or product isn't to your liking, think twice before imposing your critical judgment on it. If people believe it will work, then you've got to embrace it until they've had a chance to prove themselves. It's easy to say you encourage dissent. But the true test lies in how other people perceive you. Ask someone:

1. "Do you think I'm open to fresh, new ways of doing things?"
2. "Do people feel free to speak their minds around me?"
3. "In general, do I come across as judgmental and closeminded? Or do I come across as open and curious?"

If people perceive you as close-minded, think about how that translates into creativity, spontaneity, or the willingness to test new ideas. Only when people truly feel that their most oddball ideas and harebrained schemes are welcome can it be said that you are creating an environment of flow.

"Creative dissent stimulates me," says the executive at a large bank. "I have nothing to lose, and everything to gain, by people challenging the status quo."

Aside from the openness of leaders, what are some of the other factors behind successful innovation? Most obviously, you need some resources to be innovative. In essence, this means not short-changing the creative process. Rather than starve a project, you need to find ways to do things cheaper, better, faster. Often this means beginning with a small pilot project, assessing success, and then investing additional resources.

Second, successful innovation is most often based on market need. The "7-10 rule" states that historically, seven out of ten successful innovations are driven by a customer need – rather than a new concept, technique, or technology seeking a need. Often that need is concealed in a new product or service that is growing, but isn't yet satisfying the market. So encourage people to get close to your markets and customers in order to determine where the "pull" actually is.

A third factor of success is delegating the innovation to individual divisions and departments. Empower groups of "dedicated fanatics": small, self-managed teams who will carry the project forward regardless of the resistance they encounter.

A fourth factor of success is support at the senior management level. Senior managers who focus on failure are not going to encourage creative flow. A popular management saying is "ready, fire, aim." It's silly, but it captures an important point: Things won't be perfect the first time. The idea is to create flexible processes with learning loops built in, so that people can learn from their creative mistakes, adapt, and continually improve.