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Six Innovation Leadership Skills Everybody Needs To Master



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You don't need a crystal ball to see that the world of work is changing. According to an important [new study from McKinsey Global Institute](#), almost half the jobs people currently perform have the potential to be automated by currently existing technology. It sort of makes you wonder: what kind of work will be left for humans to do?

The answer: innovation. Clearly, to thrive in this new world of work will require different skill-sets, mindsets, and tool-sets. Chief among them: the need to bring people together as a team. The need to demonstrate deeper empathy. The ability to get new things done.

Innovation in the next economy is about much more than inventing. It's about figuring out how and where you can add unique value. It's about how fast you can unlearn, relearn and master new skills. It's about how you engage others at a deeper, more humanistic and passionate level.

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Here are six critical leadership skills that will help you turbocharge your career in the coming days:

1. You Continuously Embrace The Opportunity Mode Of Thinking

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Innovation in the new workplace is not what you do after you get your work done; it's how you approach your work. In its simplest form, innovation is coming up with ideas and bringing them to life. To solve problems. Create opportunities. Instead of innovation being a department (new product development, research and development, IT, etc.), it is quickly becoming everybody's business.

In Opportunity Mode you are passionately alert to possibility, to unmet needs, to the power of imagination, and to the thrill of turning vision into reality. Where others see problems, you sense potential. When others stress over details, you see the big picture, the progress being made, the vision of how things can be but are not yet. You realize that your perspective and attitude determines everything. And you know progress will happen, if only you keep the mood right and press ahead.

Action step: Exercise your imagination muscle. To shift perspective at any time during your day, invite yourself to come up with additional solutions to a

challenge you currently face. Ask yourself (and your team members): what are five alternate ways to address this problem? What 10 things are working well in my life, team, job or organization right now? Learn to be aware of what mode of thinking – Defeatist, Dreamer, Sustainer or Innovator – you are in at present, and invite yourself to shift.

2. You Are Adept At Assaulting Assumptions

Assumptions are like barnacles on the side of a boat; they slow us down. In my work with hundreds of teams, ranging from C-suite executives to graduate students to mid-level managers and front line employees, I've developed some simple but powerful techniques to help people blast away at assumptions. This proactive bombardment of new stimuli is essential because the brain, left to its own devices, routinely takes what brain researchers call "perceptual shortcuts" to save time and energy.

Years of experience in an industry, profession or job can also be a deterrent. "It's always been done that way" or "we already tried that" are often a sign that you and your team could use a technique to move beyond habitual thinking blocks in order to imagine alternate possibilities. Innovation begins where assumptions end. In today's hypercompetitive world, we can either assault our assumptions, or somebody else will do it for us and reap the benefits.

Action steps: Consciously challenge personal, professional and industry assumptions. Do this to spawn fresh thinking. Asking such questions as "I wonder if we..." or "what would an entirely different way of handling this situation look like?"

When the thought that "there's got to be a better way" pops into your mind just remember, there probably is. Nudge yourself to envision that better way. Experiment with alternatives and possibilities. In such moments, you are challenging the assumption that the status quo is the best or the only way - and you invited new thinking.

3. You Develop Empathy For The End Customer

Jennifer Rock worked in the marketing department at Best Buys' Minneapolis headquarters when she was tapped to oversee the company's intranet. The intranet was used to push policy changes out to the company's 1500 stores, but Jennifer and her team transformed the intranet into a two-way communications vehicle. They began hosting weekly online surveys with store employees and managers. They created online discussion sessions for employees in disparate locations. And they hosted agenda-less town hall meetings where employees can interact with senior leaders.

When I asked Jennifer about why she took these steps, she spoke of her passion for the end customer – in this case, the company's employees. “We wanted to do something about the disconnect between management and the field,” she explained to me in an interview. At the beginning of Jennifer's journey to make the intranet a two-way communication vehicle, Best Buy's employee turnover rate was over 80%. Today, it's less than 50%.

Action steps: Strive to understand the business you're in on a deeper level. Develop empathy for your end user, whether that customer is internal or external. Try to walk in their shoes. Seek to understand their pain points. Listen deeply to what that customer wants to accomplish, what problems they face, and how you and your organization might take on their problem. Step outside the bubble of your culture. Interact with more people. Wrap your brain gently around what they are trying to express.

4. You Proactively Think Ahead Of The Curve

Ever try walking around in the dark without a flashlight? It's an unsettling feeling and can often lead to injury if you walk straight into something you couldn't see. In today's hyper-changing world, you need your own version of a flashlight. Things happen fast when we aren't paying attention. Responding to issues on the home-front and in your personal life, and myriad other distractions and deadlines in the workplace can blind us to important societal, technological and other external changes. We can miss important trends, disruptions, and technologies. With your “flashlight” in hand, however, you will find things do not happen quite so suddenly.

Action steps: Your flashlight, as I tell my audiences, is your ability to illuminate the trends that surround you. Every innovator I've ever met has a voracious information diet: books, articles, alerts, reports. Developing the ability to **track emerging trends** is a skill. You get better at it with practice. It involves projecting out where these trends will go. Connecting the dots. It involves looking at what you must do or can do proactively to prepare for the future. By assessing and interpreting changes as they relate to your world, you position yourself to transform them into new opportunities.

5. You Continuously Fortify Your Idea Factory

Everybody has ideas. But only some people know how to keep their "idea factories" fortified to churn out a wealth of them on a consistent basis, when and where needed. Only a rare few know how to fuel their work with a constant flow of ideas from "ah ha" to "done." This ability to "ideate" and invite ideas on purpose using tools like mind-mapping and simple brainstorming is an essential skill of the dawning world of work.

Action steps: Always consciously manage your mental environment so that you're able to recognize the ideas that flutter into your life. Enhance your creative environment at home and at work. Turn your office into a creative place. Or, make efforts to seek inspiration outside the office. Practice encouraging creativity in the people around you. Compliment them for their "brilliant" suggestions and watch more of them appear. Remember: creativity is not a gift from the gods, but the result of preparation, routine, discipline.

6. You Are Adept At Building The Buy-In

In a world where everything seems to "go viral" instantly, we sometimes forget that persuading other people – colleagues, the boss, customers, our spouse – is an essential and developable skill. In studying breakthrough products and business models, I often find a whole lot of selling going on behind the scenes that helped the idea succeed.

For example, the 3M team responsible for launching Post-It Notes was growing desperate when senior management threatened to kill the product as a loser.

Nobody was buying it. Retail stores were indifferent as nobody was requesting the funny little pads. So the team took action. They handed out Post-It Notes and showed people how to use them. They sent them to the administrative assistants of top CEOs, who began using them on documents. That was the turning point. Eventually, people started sticking them everywhere and began asking for them at retail stores. The new product took off.

Action steps: Strive to get better at communicating the merits of taking a certain course of action. **Selling new ideas** is about surmounting obstacles, overcoming objections and gaining commitment for (your) new way of doing things. Always focus on the benefits of adopting the new way, and avoid getting caught up in the features and technical details. Solicit feedback from friends, mentors and others you trust to sharpen your message. Watch the television program Shark Tank to understand how not to sell ideas. Always think about the individual or individual you're presenting your ideas to. For instance, if your idea buyer is numbers oriented, use plenty of charts and graphs. If more aspirational, don't bog down with details, and show how this enhances the brand. And be persistent: building the buy-in for a change often takes time and patience.

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I'm president of Innovation Resource Consulting Group, based in Santa Barbara, California, and an internationally recognized thought leader in the field of innovation and leadership development. I help organizations seeking to improve top and bottom line performance via what... MORE