

Back to the Garden



An 8-Step Process for Creating
a Sustainable Culture of Innovation

ON CREATING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

“Companies are actually living organisms, not machines. We keep bringing in mechanics, when what we need are gardeners.” ~ Peter Senge

Sustainable innovation, the “endless effort to find a better way,” cannot be achieved by mechanically lining up best practices and executing them. The real catalyzing agent for renewable innovation is the *ground* from which these best practices spring – the confluence of *purpose, people, and processes* better known as *culture*. From where will the next wave of groundbreaking innovation come? *Not* from organizations mechanically imitating each others’ best practices, but from organizations with the authentic commitment to take their stand on ground that has been *cultivated* for breakthrough.

If you check the contents of the most popular books on innovation, the same topics show up again and again: strategy, systems, process, leadership, customer focus, risk, speed to market, prototyping, metrics, mass collaboration, market intelligence, technology, and creative thinking. Clearly, all of these topics are important. But none of them can take root in an organization without one fundamental element being in place – a consciously created *culture of innovation*.

Is such a culture *simple* to create? Yes. Is it *easy*? No. And the reason *why* it’s not easy is because the ground of most organizations is hard, untilled, and in major need of clearing.

The metaphor that most clearly conveys the effort required is *creating a garden*. To experienced gardeners, the steps needed to create a garden are simple. To the inexperienced gardener, it’s a tangle of complexity. Yes, gardening demands sustained and methodic effort. And yes, sweating comes with the territory. But getting a yield – something to harvest – is a fundamentally straightforward task.

If *your* company is clear about the effort required, creating a culture of innovation (let’s just call it a *garden* of innovation) is simply a matter of taking the time to execute each step thoroughly – in the time-honored way gardeners have *always* practiced their craft.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An 8-Step Process for Creating a Sustainable Culture of Innovation

1. Whet the Appetite

Stimulate your workforce's innate hunger to innovate

2. Stake and Prepare the Ground

Clarify the scope of your effort...increase organizational readiness

3. Find the Seeds

Locate powerful, new ideas – the fuzzy front end of innovation

4. Fence the Garden

Protect aspiring innovators from naysayers and idea killers

5. Plant the Seeds

Improve the process for new ideas being pitched and taking root

6. Tend New Growth

Find healthy ways to nurture the development of new possibilities

7. Thin and Transplant

Evaluate, simplify & decide... know what to focus on & what to defer

8. Celebrate the Harvest

Acknowledge the bounty and the gardeners...express appreciation

1. WHET THE APPETITE

“I want to put a ding in the universe. – Steve Jobs

If you are serious about being a gardener of innovation, the first thing you will need is *hunger* – a real appetite for results. Growing a garden takes sustained effort. It’s hard work – most of it unglamorous and unappreciated. Hunger for a yield is the serious gardener’s real motivator. Yes, the serious gardener *likes* being outdoors and, yes, the serious gardener *likes* getting exercise, but the ultimate product of their labors – the harvest – is what it’s all about. Without this level of commitment, the gardening effort remains only a hobby and does not have the “roll up your sleeves and get dirty” quality so essential to reaping a result. If your workforce has no appetite for innovation, you will need to find a way to whet it. If you don’t, people will sit idly by, waiting for R&D, senior leadership, or the tooth fairy to lead the charge. And while they may *talk* about growth, shovels, and the need for bulk purchase of mulch, talk won’t put food on the table. Fortunately, somewhere, deep inside *everyone* in your organization is the impulse to create. It’s innate. *Your* task is to awaken this impulse and help people *own* the effort to innovate. If they don’t, the only thing you’ll be eating at harvest time will be your own words. (PS: Winter’s on the way...)

A sampling of what YOU can do:

1. Invite people *already* inspired to innovate to be part of your core team.
2. Communicate and celebrate all in-house innovation successes.
3. Lead a series of senior team “innovation strategy & alignment” sessions.
4. Create a business case for *why* innovation is so crucial to your company’s success. Then present it at a series of well-designed town meetings.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help:

1. Quantify your company’s “innovation readiness” via our online *Culture of Innovation* poll.
2. Lead a company-wide, *360° Mission Statement* process.
3. Facilitate an *Innovation at Work* strategy session for your senior team.
4. Provide copies of *Awake at the Wheel*, our innovation-whetting book.
5. Facilitate a series of jump-start, *Applied Innovation* workshops

What can you do to whet your workforce’s appetite to innovate within the next month?

2. STAKE and PREPARE THE GROUND

“It’s not enough to be busy. Ants are busy. What are we busy about?”

– H.D. Thoreau

Amateur gardeners, fueled by visions of ripe tomatoes, have a tendency to plant *before* they are really ready. Unclear about how large a garden they can sustain, unsure about what’s needed to prepare the ground, unable to resist the impulse for a quick yield, they rush in willy nilly. The result? Lots of wasted effort and the kind of sweating that signifies almost nothing. The same holds true for organizations who claim they want a culture of innovation. The antidote is a simple, two-step process (though the description of the process is much simpler than the execution). First, an organization needs to get clear about the *scope* of the effort they want to make. It needs to “stake its territory” or, more precisely, define the *fields* in which it wants to innovate. (If it tries to innovate everywhere, all the time, it will only deplete its resources and exhaust its workforce.) Secondly, it needs to prepare the ground for planting. This task includes removing obstacles that will interfere with growth, as well as enriching the fertility of the soil. Weekend gardeners cringe at this kind of preparatory effort. It doesn’t feel like fun and there’s nothing immediately to show for it. But *without* this effort there will be no foundation – no ground – for future success.

A sampling of what you YOU can do:

1. Ask your senior team to prioritize the company’s top five innovation needs.
2. Quantify the cost/benefits of innovating in these top five fields.
3. Ask middle managers what they can do to establish a culture of innovation.
4. Begin researching idea management software options.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help:

1. Jump start the process via a customized keynote presentation.
2. Lead a Face the Music event to help your workforce clear the air, go beyond their business blues, and embrace your organization’s effort to innovate.
3. Facilitate a Leading Innovation workshop for managers.
4. Train selected change agents how to facilitate brainstorm sessions.
5. Launch Ingenuity Bank at a company-wide town meeting.

What three areas of your business are most in need of innovation?

What can you do this week to begin preparing the ground?

3. FIND THE SEEDS

“I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones.” – John Cage

You can have ample space to plant a garden. You can know exactly where that ample space is. And you can have lots of fertile soil in this ample space. But unless you have healthy seeds to plant, space is all you'll ever have. If you want a garden of innovation, you need seeds. Not just one kind of seed, but many. Indeed, the more varied seeds you have, the greater your chances for an interesting yield. In the realm of innovation, *ideas are the seeds*. All innovation begins with an idea. Ideas are the fuzzy front end of the innovation process – the alpha and omega of new growth. No ideas, no innovation. It's that simple. The big question, then, is this: *Where will your company get its new ideas?* Is there an existing process? And if so, is this process working? Can you count on your workforce to deliver high quality, game-changing ideas? Or is there something else you need to be doing in order to tap their brilliance?

A sampling of what YOU can do:

1. Ask your direct reports for three well-developed ideas per week.
2. Re-state your company's biggest challenges in the form of questions beginning with the words “How can we?”
3. Identify ten already scheduled meetings and dedicate at least 25% of these meetings to idea generation.
4. Invite selected customers/clients to a series of brainstorming sessions.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help:

1. Facilitate a series of *High Velocity Brainstorming* sessions.
2. Facilitate a series of *creative thinking trainings*.
3. Provide each employee with a deck of our *Free the Genie* cards.
4. Invite forward-thinking managers to engage the services of *BrainTrust*, our net-centric, think tank of visionaries, experts, and creative thinkers.
5. Coach you on setting up idea drives for *Ingenuity Bank*.

*Where, in your organization, is the biggest untapped source of new ideas?
What can you do, this month, to tap this fountain of brilliance?*

4. PLANT THE SEEDS

“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your ideas won't get you anywhere.” – Lee Iacocca

While it is true that some seeds, spontaneously carried by the wind and landing on fertile soil, find a way to plant themselves, most gardens require that seeds be planted in a more dependable way. If your company is sincere about its intention to create a culture of innovation, it will need to refine its seed planting process. More specifically, it will need to establish a more effective way for the *carriers* of seeds to increase the odds of those seeds taking root. Yes, aspiring innovators will need to become more adept at pitching/planting their ideas. But at the same time, the people *to whom* new ideas are being pitched will need to become more receptive to the possibility that something new is worthy of taking root. Having a silo of healthy seeds is a good start, but ultimately those seeds need to be planted – and they need to be planted in a way that will radically increase the odds of them growing into seedlings.

A sampling of what YOU can do:

1. Identify best “idea pitching” practices and spread the word.
2. Identify skillful, in-house communicators and ask them to mentor others.
3. Ask employees what they need from management in order to make the company’s idea pitching process more inviting, humane, and effective.
4. Train your workforce in the art and science of making skillful presentations.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help:

1. Observe a series of idea pitching sessions and provide feedback.
2. Facilitate a series of *Undiscovered Genius* workshops
3. Provide one-on-one *Master Speaker coaching* to selected leaders
4. Facilitate a series of *LCS* (idea feedback) workshops

What is the simplest thing you can do this month to help your company improve its idea pitching process?

5. FENCE THE GARDEN

*“Never discourage anyone who continually makes progress, no matter how slow.”
– Plato*

If you’ve ever planted a garden, you’ve experienced the phenomenon of uninvited predators showing up at all hours to devour your tender, young seedlings. Deer, raccoons, moles, rabbits, and a host of other unidentifiable varmints seem to have no other mission in life but to downsize your dreams of winning the state fair or, at the very least, eliminate all possibility of having fresh lettuce for dinner. It comes with the territory. And it will continue to come with the territory unless you *fence your garden*. Organizations of all shapes and sizes experience the same phenomenon. Promising new business growth ideas – the tasty indicators of breakthrough innovation – are routinely devoured by ravenous corporate naysayers. That is, *unless* the organization finds a way to protect the in-house innovators who are originating and developing these promising new ideas. Your role, as a gardener of innovation, is to fence your garden and protect your people from the overly acidic scrutiny, doubt, and premature evaluation of predominantly left-brained, metric-driven, inhibitors of innovation. It can be done. It must be done. And *you* are the one to champion the process.

A sampling of what YOU can do:

1. Eliminate all unnecessary innovation metrics and bureaucratic protocols.
2. Identify your company’s biggest naysayers and serve them with an “aspiring innovators restraining order.”
3. Request all naysayers to seek *you* out (instead of aspiring innovators) with their concerns about experimental projects and pilot programs.
4. Provide safe havens for aspiring innovators to collaborate on new projects away from the scrutiny and micromanagement of in-house skeptics.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help:

1. Facilitate *Leading Innovation* workshops for middle managers.
2. Provide *executive coaching* to idea killers & other garden variety naysayers.
3. Teach *LCS* to all supervisors, managers, influencers, and change agents.

In what ways can you protect your direct reports from the chronic naysaying behavior of the senior team and/or Board of Directors?

6. TEND NEW GROWTH

“A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn. It can be stabbed to death by a quip, and worried to death by a frown on the right man’s brow.”

– Charlie Brower

Conceiving a garden is relatively easy. It requires no special skills, discipline, or education. Anyone can do it. Indeed, anyone *does* do it every single summer. *Getting a harvest*, however, is an entirely different matter. It is not easy – and unlike conception, requires skill, discipline, resources, and the ability to learn on the job. In the same way, *conceiving new ideas* is relatively easy. It happens every day of the year to millions of people. Bringing them to fruition is not so easy. Along the way, they get neglected, mishandled, and trampled on. What starts out as a brilliant new possibility, often shrivels on the vine. Most organizations have no conscious process for nurturing the growth of new ideas. And because they don’t, many powerful ideas never mature. They may break new ground, but they don’t necessarily flower and bear fruit. *It doesn’t have to be that way*. With the right kind of sustained effort, gardeners of innovation can dramatically increase the odds of exciting new ideas becoming part of the harvest and making it to market.

A sampling of what YOU can do:

1. Create “virtual garages” for employees to work on promising, new ventures.
2. Ask managers to spend more time giving feedback to aspiring innovators.
3. Make “innovation slush funds” available to project champions.
4. Establish well-placed “innovation spaces” to encourage creative thinking, collaboration, and cross-functional brainstorming.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help

1. Coach idea killers and other garden variety naysayers.
2. Facilitate High Velocity Brainstorming sessions for fast-track project teams.
3. Train selected change agents to facilitate Conducting Genius.

What is the simplest thing the senior team can do this week to foster the growth of a project already considered to be a winner?

7. THIN and TRANSPLANT

“The mark of a true artist is knowing what to eliminate.”

– Johannes Brahms

Inexperienced gardeners, intoxicated by their need for a big harvest and overcompensating for their fear of having nothing to show for their efforts, tend to plant too many seeds too close together. Their fear usually dissipates in a few weeks when the first seedlings emerge, but then another challenge surfaces – what to do with the apparent bounty of new growth. While the profusion of greenery certainly *looks* good to the untrained eye, the reality is different. New seedlings start competing with each other for water and nutrients. Roots entangle. Left unaddressed, the results are disappointing – row after row of stunted, scraggly plants. Savvy gardeners respond quickly, thinning out new growth to make room for a select number of the healthiest plants to flourish. *Really* savvy gardeners go one step further – transplanting the healthiest of the thinned out plants to new, roomier locations. Organizations trying to raise the bar for innovation face the same challenge. Intoxicated by their need for impressive growth (and wanting to involve as many employees as possible in the process), they get overwhelmed by a profusion of ideas and initiate too many projects – ideas and projects that end up competing for the same, finite resources. The result? Scraggly, stunted, and undeveloped ventures. The antidote? A clear strategy for how their organization will evaluate, select, and fund new initiatives – along with a process for identifying promising new growth to be transplanted for future development.

A sampling of what YOU can do:

1. Identify and communicate the criteria by which new ideas will be evaluated.
2. Identify the resources available to support new growth initiatives.
3. Establish “greenhouse environments” that will enable your company to nurture the growth of new ideas and pilot programs.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help:

1. Coach your Idea Review team how to effectively evaluate the thousands of ideas employees will submit via *Ingenuity Bank*.

What promising ideas or initiatives that were killed last year should have been transplanted into an “idea greenhouse?”

8. Celebrate the Harvest

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. – Goethe

All cultures around the world have a holiday, ritual, or ceremony dedicated to expressing gratitude for the bounty of the harvest. In their bones, they understand the purpose, power, and privilege of giving thanks. The season’s harvest may have fed the body, but the *acknowledgment* of the harvest feeds the soul, strengthening everyone’s resolve to begin the growing process *again* the next season. Corporate cultures could learn a lesson or two from this age-old practice. Historically, organizations have been severely lacking when the time comes to acknowledge the harvest *and* the people whose efforts were essential to manifesting that harvest. The endless demand for output drives most business leaders to conclude that acknowledging successes is a waste of time – a luxury no bottom-line-watching organization could afford. Somehow, deep within the collective psyche of senior leaders, lurks the fear that celebrating successes will invariably lead to a fat and lazy workforce. *Nothing could be further from the truth.* People flourish when their efforts are acknowledged – not only individually, but as an entire workforce. If you are serious about establishing a sustainable culture of innovation, take the time to acknowledge your gardeners. For their effort. For their resilience. For their collaboration. And for whatever harvest there is.

A sampling of what YOU can do:

1. Take some time this week to individually acknowledge each of your direct reports for the efforts they’ve made this year.
2. Ask your direct reports to take some time this week to acknowledge all of *their* direct reports.
3. Dedicate some time at your next *already* scheduled meeting to acknowledge a team or department for their collective efforts to innovate.
4. Put together a team of people to schedule, plan, and facilitate an event to celebrate your company’s “innovation harvest” for the year.

How IDEA CHAMPIONS can help

- *Coach your team* on the process of organizing a celebrate-the-harvest event.
- Design and co-facilitate an *Oscar-like awards ceremony* for your company.

How can you kick-start the process for organizing a “celebrate-the-innovation-harvest” event?

IDEA CHAMPIONS OFFERINGS

Service or Product	Description	Group Size
1. Needs Assessment		
• Consulting	Just-in-time counsel, design, and support	1
• Culture of Innovation survey	Company-wide, online poll	unlimited
• Ask the People	One-on-one interviews w/ selected employees	1
• 360° Mission Statement	Company-wide process to re-define your mission	unlimited
2. Workshops/Training		
• Innovation at Work	Senior Team strategy and alignment sessions	5–12
• Applied Innovation	Simple way to jump start a culture of innovation	20–50
• Banking on Innovation	Creative thinking training	12–20
• Ingenious Leadership	Innovation workshop for managers	10 – 24
• Team Innovation	Hybrid of teambuilding and ideation	12-24
• Undiscovered Genius	How to communicate and sell big ideas	10–35
• Master Speaker	How to be a skillful, public presenter	6–20
• Conducting Genius	TTT: how to lead brainstorming sessions	1-8
3. Large Group Events		
• Awake at the Wheel	Interactive keynote based on Mitch Ditkoff’s book	50–50,000
• Face the Music	Musical event to help people go beyond the blues	20–500
• The Champies	Upbeat, Oscar-like, awards ceremony	20–1,000
• Team Drumming	Interactive, community building event	20–200
4. Ideation Process		
• High Velocity Brainstorming	Fast-paced, ideation and commitment session	8 – 24
• Breakthrough Café	After hours ideation event in a café-like setting	25–250
• BrainTrust	Outsourced think tank	5–10
5. Software		
• Ingenuity Bank	Enterprise-wide, idea management software	unlimited
6. Self-Paced Materials		
• Awake at the Wheel	Business fable & creative thinking tools (book)	1
• Innovation Kits	Selection of innovation-sparking materials	1
• Free the Genie	Deck of 55 cards to jump start innovation	1
• The All Hands on Deck	Deck of 64 cards to foster teamwork	1
7. Coaching		
• Executive Coaching	One-on-one management sessions	1