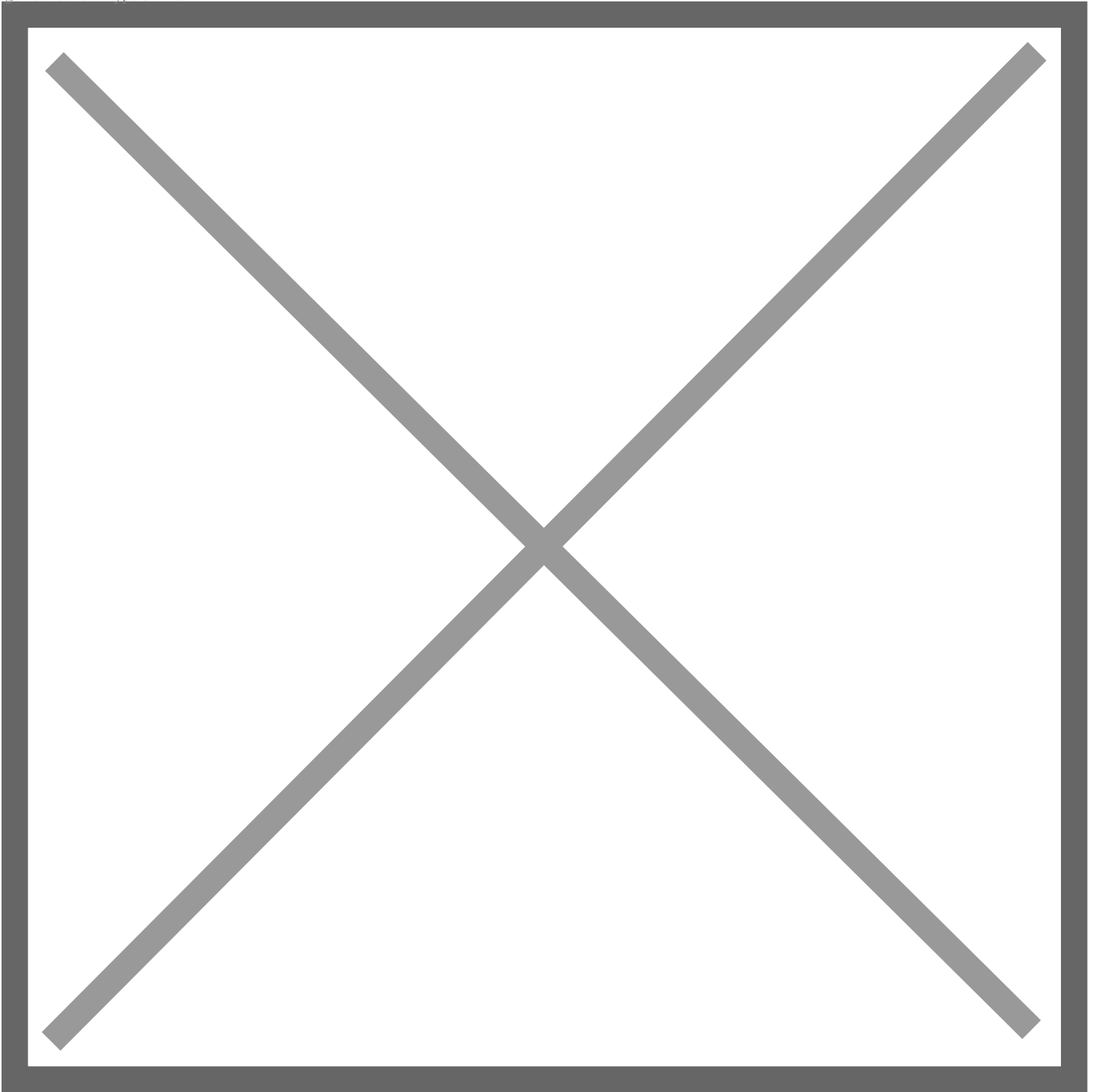


Image not found or type unknown



## Innovation at the top and the bottom

### Description

By Hal Williams

I have been revisiting recently one of my favorite subjects, innovation. Two abiding challenges stand out for me when it comes to harnessing the power of fresh approaches. Both reflect the balance between the traditional top down and bottom-up approaches. The first challenge is the right mix between relying on organizational systems to promote innovation and yet noting that divergent thinkers least likely to thrive when approached by the Department of Innovation. Yet they are more often the stemwinder for innovation than are senior leaders and managers.

The second challenge drops down a level to the balance between units and individuals within them. Teams are now the fashionable unit of work. We bring people together. Individuals with a divergent view, however, often find sharp edges dulled rather than homed in group process.

My sense is that the top prevails in most organizations. Process and structure are the key to productive behavior and harmony. I love language and note that in most organizational writings, the word “innovation” is used much more frequently than the word “innovator.” The person is taken out of the frame, whether intentionally or not. I had a similar experience with a colleague who suggested we move from the term “prototyper” to that of innovator. We welcome prototypes and the act of prototyping. But the person doing it is not named.

A more explicit directive lies in the belief that innovators introduce noise if not chaos into organizations. This need not be the case. Innovators actually thrive when given a sandbox rather than a wide-open field in which to innovate. Great leaders look for direction less in terms of on-going work and more in terms of three more episodic drivers: displacement, necessity, and opportunity. They create the field and endorse the energy. Then they get out of the way.

Now back to the starting point. For innovation to bloom, I would change “top down” to “top in” with the intention to move more quickly to the granular factors that so determine success. And I would replace “bottom up” with “bottom out”. Innovations that show promise need to gather champions on the shop floor to counter the inevitable rubs of something new with the structure and process to support what now exists.

First top it off. Then, bottoms up

**Date Created**

December 2021