

# Assumptions for Innovation

by Hal Williams



## Contents

INNOVATION, CONTENT AND PROCESS 2  
INNOVATORS: THE PEOPLE 3  
CONDITIONS FOR INNOVATING 4  
MANAGING INNOVATION 5  
SPREADING INNOVATIONS 6

These observations are based on extensive interviews, case studies, and The Rensselaerville Institute (TRI) project work with over 200 organizations in the U.S. and Canada. Each assumption is formulated as a proposition which, if accurate, has important strategic implications for the practice of innovation. This publication grew out of an article by the same name published in *ChemTech*, the journal of consulting engineers. It has been reprinted in over 15 other publications. The last refinements were added in 2018.

TRI defines innovation as an explicit test of a new or different approach to outperform present practice. Innovations can target at either efficiency (doing things at lower cost) or effectiveness (increasing benefits or gain) or both. The observations included apply to innovations at program and organizational levels and many have found them applicable their own lives.

For organizations, innovation is a method of planned change. It suggests that good policy can follow good practice. For individuals, innovation is a way to act that can yield small or large improvements. Innovation makes behavior intentional to results.

## INNOVATION, CONTENT AND PROCESS

1. **Innovation generally comes from individuals rather than from books, budgets, committees or other sources.** Innovation does not happen simply because an organization removes barriers presumed to prevent it. Innovation occurs when individuals are found and enabled to practice innovative behavior.

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2. **Innovation is different from creativity.** Creativity is having a new idea. Innovation is taking an idea, regardless of source, and doing something with it. In organizations, bright new ideas are far more common than bright new applications.

3. **Innovations often involve some type of discontinuity from present practice.** While some innovations come from or seek incremental adjustments, many involve displacement from existing activity.
4. **Innovation often is based on a new combination or ordering of existing elements.** It does not necessarily involve the creation of new elements themselves, but rather the transfer of a practice or a concept from one realm to another.
5. **Innovations tend to add new value rather than to convey existing value.** They often do so by creating rather than consuming resources. Some innovators convert liabilities into assets.
6. **Innovations often precede their foundations.** They are initially concerned that things work in practice, not in theory. Major innovations, however, often develop a conceptual base at a later time which enables further change.
7. **Innovation is not totally a logical process.** It often relies on insight and intuition that cannot be fully understood in analytical ways. At the same time, innovation tends to be purposeful behavior, not random action.
8. **Innovations are often not well understood until completed.** The real value or meaning of an innovation may lie in the unintended. And almost all innovations have unanticipated consequences, including adverse ones.
9. **Luck plays a role in many innovations.** While innovators receive no higher a share of luck than do other people, they are more prepared to capitalize upon it when it happens.
10. **Innovation has some strong similarities with entrepreneurship.** Both are processes driven by opportunity and both are animated by a person more than a plan.
11. **Innovations happen in the context of an innovation use or user.** They are often driven by an evident problem of a client, consumer, or “customer” by another name.
12. **Innovation often begins with change at local points of an organization and then broadens in consequence to system-wide effects.** In contrast, most change strategies, including reorganization and policy edicts, start with a large canvas, then attempt to narrow to local consequences.
13. **Innovation does not tend to come from authority.** There is generally no relationship between higher levels of authority and higher levels of innovation. Also, assumed responsibility proves far more critical than delegated responsibility.

## **INNOVATORS: THE PEOPLE**

14. **Innovators tend to focus on opportunities, not problems.** Most people see problems and issues; innovators see prospects and potentials. Problems are ongoing and timeless; opportunities are immediate and time-bound.
15. **Innovators prefer feasibility tests to feasibility studies.** Most wish to implement an idea on a small scale as part of the developmental process. Feasibility tests are often less expensive than feasibility studies.
16. **Innovators prefer learning to evaluation.** Learning defined as behavioral change is one natural outcome of trial and error; evaluation defined as assessment or judgment is not.
17. **Innovators tend to be more interested in building upon and using their strengths than in correcting their deficiencies.** Few appear concerned with becoming “well rounded.”

18. **Innovative people are defined by what they do, not what they are or what they say.** They vary greatly in personality, background, degree of extrovertedness and most human variables. There is no one innovating “type.”
19. **Innovators do have or learn a few characteristics which distinguish them from others in an organization.** Among them are a desire to take personal responsibility for results, an intensive focus, an abiding itch to improve things, a high level of persistence, and a strongly optimistic bent.
20. **Innovators generally have a strong need for independence.** They tend not to wish to be closely managed or to closely manage others. Their needs for independence and achievement are typically higher than their needs for power or status.
21. **Innovators take full advantage of change and fluidity.** They are not in the forefront of those who press for clarity on procedure and structure. They know and use the value of fuzziness, and even of chaos.
22. **Innovators in organizations are different from critics.** When asked to prescribe and implement a solution, critics move on to their next target. Innovators respond.
23. **Advocates and innovators tend to play different organizational roles.** Advocates defend rights; innovators meet needs.
24. **Innovation often comes from people new to a given activity or context.** Fresh eyes can have a divergent perspective. Familiarity can be more restricting than helpful.
25. **Innovators make effective use of the past.** They tend to learn lessons from other places and times and to apply them selectively to present conditions. Indeed, history can be a major source of their inspiration.
26. **Innovators tend to focus on the present more than the future.** They deal with the literalness of current opportunities and solutions and tend to find longer term projections abstract and less vital.
27. **Few people are either always innovating or never innovating.** Rather, distinct threshold points – crisis and displacement as well as opportunity – can prompt innovative behavior.
28. **While innovators are comfortable with risk, they do not try to maximize it.** Also, they see risk differently. While most people seek the risks of taking action, innovators see the risk of inaction.
29. **Energy and confidence are greater predictors of innovator success than are skill or knowledge.** These attributes enable persistence and staying power to handle barriers, apathy, and dissent.

## CONDITIONS FOR INNOVATING

30. **Innovation depends more on the timing of resources than their amount.** In many instances, a smaller amount of money, time, or other resource given immediately is more valuable to the innovator than a larger resource base available in the future.
31. **Innovation often comes from a resource-lean environment.** Examples of successful innovations in both public and private sectors often reflect a handful of people achieving amazing results on a “bootstrap” basis.
32. **Innovation always assumes that at least some practices can be improved.**

Without that belief, virtually all efforts at change are viewed with suspicion.

33. **Successful innovators tend to have a manager or sponsor who enables them.** Few innovators, especially in larger organizations, succeed without some support, often focused on creating permission or suspending some rules.
34. **Innovators can be found at all levels and places in organizations.** In particular, there is no evidence that those with low formal status have any less capacity to innovate than those with high status.
35. **To be embraced by organizations, innovations must generally be seen as helping leaders to achieve existing priorities.** New initiatives that imply additional agendas are much less likely to be welcomed than innovations which help deal with what is already on the plate.
36. **Many forms of planning can be more harmful than helpful to innovation.** Planning uses trend and incremental change analysis to reinforce the values of continuity and predictability. This can disallow the intuitions and discontinuities innovators favor.
37. **Larger scale innovations are more likely to be practiced in areas where power is more concentrated than dispersed.** While influence vacuums are ideal places for small-scale improvement, the reality is that major new applications require some counterforce to the inertia of current practice.
38. **Innovations often need new paradigms or mindsets.** Much of what is done routinely is sanctified by existing beliefs and assumptions. Innovation is often enabled by a new starting point whether conceptual, empirical, or even rhetorical.
39. **While groups are not generally the source of innovations, they can play critical roles in nurturing and legitimizing them.** Collectivities to support innovation, however, are not formed by such typical criteria as homogeneity or representation needs. They are teams formed of those best in a position to make the innovation work.
40. **When innovators form teams, it is generally based on adding counterpoint strengths to their own.** They are less interested in building an undifferentiated "critical mass" for involvement.
41. **For innovators, the tended result is more important than the intended activity.** In conventional programs, the activity is often held constant with the results allowed to vary. For innovators, this priority is reversed.

## MANAGING INNOVATION

42. **Most innovators will accept givens and limits.** As long as they have support for experimentation within those limits, a boundary is actually enabling, not constraining.
43. **The incidence of innovation actually increases when there is a focal point or "sandbox" defined.** This challenge is lacking when innovation is encouraged in all areas without focus or discrimination.
44. **An innovation need not be successful to be useful.** Failure is a necessary and even ideal condition for learning. When something succeeds, we are less prone to analyze or understand it than when something fails.
45. **Innovation creates organizational capacity.** It brings the capacity for change that will be needed later, if not sooner, as external shifts occur in the organization's environment.

46. **Innovation is not an effective tool for remediation.** In general, it requires a threshold of readiness, including self-confidence and a disposition to act.
47. **Good innovation and good management are not the same.** Innovation is a specialized undertaking whose principles should not be applied to all situations and conditions.
48. **Innovators are frequently irreverent and do not fit nicely into typical organizational roles.** They can be irritants in organizations typically oriented toward avoiding the possibility of error and rewarding predictability.
49. **Many of the rules of thumb for managing employees in a public service context are not applicable to innovators.** Freedom and flexibility to innovate are among the few rewards that have value to innovators.
50. **Innovation is not readily institutionalized, given its origin in individuals who resist structural containment.** Rather, it is the condition for encouraging and enabling employees to innovate that can be embedded in organizational fabrics.
51. **Innovation is one form of human resource development.** For some, it builds capacity. For others, it allows them to better use the capacities they already have.
52. **Key support to innovators from their managers and champions is more often given in interpersonal than in structural terms.** Traditional process is more readily suspended than challenged or changed. Informal understandings which establish new and needed conditions for a limited time period are more common.
53. **Innovation is experimentation.** Management encouraging innovation must embrace the idea of learning by doing. Innovation is defined by what it does, not what it says.
54. **Innovation is more readily born in malaise than in complacency.** The perceived gap between what exists and what should be proves highly motivating. Visions which show this gap can be especially effective.
55. **The stress by certain funding streams on “new programs” encourages novelty but not necessarily innovation.** Novelty is a new face; innovation is a new use.

## **SPREADING INNOVATIONS**

56. **The spread of an innovation is rarer than innovation itself.** An increase in pilots, models, and demonstration projects which seek to be replicated has little effect on this reality.
57. **Organizational staff varies greatly in their receptivity to innovations.** In general, the distribution curve begins with a small number of “early adapters” and moves through a large middle group to a final number of people who are “laggards.”
58. **The information available for an innovation is not adequate to forecast further success by those who might use it.** One problem is the widespread lack of clear assumptions connecting solution to problem. Another is the emphasis on superficial “show and tell” formats for sharing experiences.
59. **Some innovations are not available for dissemination because they are hidden from the view.** They are done outside of the formal system entirely. This is especially true at decentralized places.
60. **Innovations are more often transferred from one place to another at the periphery of the organization than through communication to the core and then back “out”**

**again.** Genuine learning systems involving a centralized base of experiments and results available to all parts in the organization are rare.

61. **Successfully transmitted innovations are simple to grasp, although not necessarily simple to practice.** They generally focus on one target, not multiple goals, and have clear imagery to describe them.
62. **Innovations are more often spread by personal message than by mass media.** The energy and conviction that an innovation will work is most effectively conveyed by the innovator in person or by a person who has directly used the new approach.
63. **Innovations are more effectively sold as products with benefits to users than as processes with values for a system.** The spread of innovation hinges less on what is good for the organization than on what will make a person's life happier and more effective within it.