

INNOVATION: Myths and Realities

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This article defines innovation and explains how to make it happen through a simple yet comprehensive model.

It addresses four myths surrounding the concept of innovation and provides key, cutting-edge findings in the area.

Critical Questions

The problems of modern corporate and organisational life cry out for more innovative solutions.

But what really is innovation?

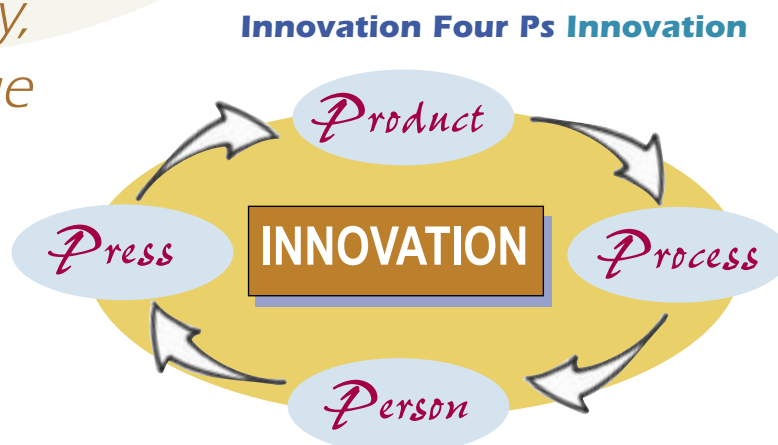
Can it be learned?

How can you make it happen?

While occurring increasingly in conversation, the word 'innovation' means different things to different people. This is due, in part, to a lack of reliable and accurate information on the subject. Indeed, four myths have emerged surrounding the concept of innovation, which this article debunks.

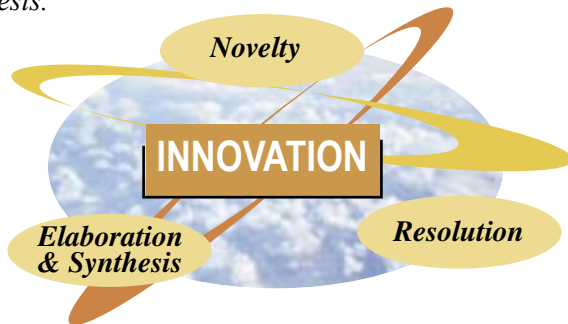
The Answers: A Useful Model of Innovation

The Innovation Four Ps Model - Product, Process, Person and Press (not to be confused with the four Ps of marketing, more commonly known as the marketing mix: product, price, promotion and place) - provides a useful structure for considering answers to the critical questions surrounding innovation.



Innovative Product

Product refers to a vital question - what makes a product or service innovative? Many people equate workplace innovation with quality and continuous improvement. That is, refining or improving existing structures, systems and processes to come up with better products or services. While this is highly desirable and challenging, it is more characteristic of an 'adaptive' culture, as opposed to a truly innovative one. For a product or service to be innovative, three criteria need to be met: *Novelty*, *Resolution*, and *Elaboration/Synthesis*.



The first criterion, *novelty*, refers to the originality of the product or service. That is, people are attracted to it because of its uniqueness. There are two sub-criteria of novelty: qualities referred to as *transformational* and *germinal*. A *transformational* product transforms the world in the scope of its ramifications. Examples of this are the telephone, television, pocket calculator and Internet. All have clearly changed the way people do things, and the changes are global. A product/service is categorised as *germinal* if it generates other related new ideas in the marketplace. This occurs when organisations start to emulate the products of successful trendsetters, such as a particular type of software, car design, bank loan package or account facility. Manufacturers of colour televisions, mobile phones and automobiles, as further examples, keep coming up with transformed concepts, often incorporating added features as they build upon initially novel products.

The second criterion of innovation is *resolution*. That is, the idea, product or service has to be workable, 'fill the bill' and be relevant to the problem or unanswered need at hand. In other words, the innovative product has to be perceived as 'the answer' to the existing problem or situation.

The third and final criterion of an innovative product/service is *elaboration/synthesis*. This aspect deals with issues related to style and how the product is completed. Is the product well-crafted? Appealing? Aesthetically attractive? Elegant? Well presented or packaged? Related to this are the concepts of simplicity

and user-friendliness. Usually, this criterion is a measure of the energy and effort invested in the product, as well as the degree to which the product has been refined and developed. The aesthetic attractiveness of Apple computers is a case in point.

Myth One

The current lack of accurate information about what actually defines a product or service as innovative has spawned the myth that innovation is about making improvements to existing products, services, processes and/or systems. ***In fact***, true innovation is about creating novel products and/or services that solve current problems or fulfil unmet market (business, social or community) needs in practical and cost-effective ways, not necessarily by using existing systems or conceptual frameworks.

Innovative Process

The second P in the innovation model - *Process* - refers to the mechanism or practices that lead to innovative products and services. More than 50 years of research conducted by experts in the areas of creativity and innovation (that is, applied creativity – another way to define innovation) reveals that the innovative process is universal. More specifically, process refers to the very distinct stages individuals and teams progress through to produce creative ideas and innovative products or services. While some experts assert that this creative/innovation process is natural and happens spontaneously, at least for some people, understanding the process makes it accessible for anyone interested in achieving innovative results. This implies, of course, that the innovative process can be taught, learned and systematically and successfully implemented.

Myth Two

The lack of information about the innovative process has led to the second myth of innovation: that is, that innovation happens ad-hoc or at random, merely by having the desire or wish to be innovative, by talking about it, by telling ourselves and others that we are an innovative team or organisation, or by making minor improvements here and there. ***The reality*** is that innovation requires a thoughtful, deliberate and integrated approach to creative problem-solving and the application of a very specific set of strategies, processes and skills.

Innovative Person

Person - the third P of the innovation model – refers to issues related to people. This includes individual differences and teamwork, and how this interaction impacts on the teamwork required for innovation. Individuals display natural preferences or biases towards each of the steps of the innovation process. The more such individual differences are understood within the team environment, the more synergy can be achieved to produce innovative outputs.

Dr Gerard Puccio, Director of the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo's State University of New York (SUNY), has investigated individuals' preferences (as opposed to abilities) in relation to the innovative process. His research reveals that innovation calls for breakthrough thinking - a blend of insight, imagination, analysis and action. He has also identified four distinct preferences individuals display when engaging in the innovative process: *clarifying*, *ideating*, *developing* and *implementing*. Further, Dr Puccio has developed a profiling system that, without labelling individuals, provides teams with a striking profile of where they excel and break down in the innovation process.

Since 1985, Dr Michael West and his associates from the Sheffield Innovation Research Program in the UK have been investigating the factors that help and hinder innovation in work-teams, the qualities that distinguish highly innovative teams from others, the way in which the innovation process develops and progresses over time, and practical measures that can be recommended to facilitate innovation and match the demands of the workteam. Results from this research indicate that team diversity is a major contributor to innovative outputs.

Myth Three

The lack of information and understanding of the third P of innovation - *Person* - has led to the third myth of innovation. That is, that innovation springs from a single person effort. **The reality** is that innovation is the product of the team effort required to achieve synergy. This type of teamwork does not happen on an ad-hoc or random basis; it requires understanding of individual differences in relation to the innovation process and is achieved when individual team members work together, adjusting their natural preferences while working through the innovation process systematically.

Innovative Press

The fourth P – *Press* – relates to the context (i.e. climate, culture and environment) that facilitates and nurtures innovation. So, what is the context in which innovation flourishes and grows? Dr Goran Ekvall, in his pioneering work initiated in Sweden some 20 years ago, identified 10 elements necessary for producing and sustaining new product innovations in the marketplace. Ekvall's work has been further refined and validated by the Buffalo Group at SUNY, culminating in the identification of nine dimensions of the climate for innovation. These nine dimensions are:

1. **Challenge.** How challenged, how emotionally involved, and how committed are individuals to their work?
2. **Freedom.** How free are individuals to decide how to do their job?
3. **Idea Time.** Do people have time to think things through before having to act?
4. **Idea Support.** Do people have adequate resources to give new ideas a try?
5. **Trust & Openness.** Do individuals feel safe in speaking their mind openly and offering different points of view?
6. **Playfulness and Humor.** How relaxed are individuals in the workplace - is it OK to have fun?
7. **Conflicts.** To what degree do people engage in interpersonal conflict or 'warfare'?
8. **Debates.** To what extent do people engage in lively, constructive debate about relevant issues?
9. **Risk-taking.** Is it OK to fail - or make mistakes - when trying new things?

The Sheffield Innovation Research Program also led to a model for team effectiveness and innovativeness and an instrument that measures climate for innovation. The instrument comprises five scales (participative safety, support for innovation, vision, task orientation and social desirability) and 15 sub-scales.

Dr Teresa Amabile, from Harvard Business School, in collaboration with the Center for Creative Leadership, studied the relationships between climate (including organisational, work group and psychological climate) and innovation. The outcome of this study was an instrument that measures work environment factors that stimulate and hinder innovation.

The single organisational variable that most supports innovation, however, is leadership. Regardless of the type of organisation or industry, unless innovation is championed and supported by senior management it won't permeate throughout the organisation.

Myth Four

The lack of information regarding *Press* has led to the fourth common myth of innovation. That is, innovation is only relevant for certain industries and/or large companies. **The reality** is that innovation provides a competitive edge and is relevant to all organisations, regardless of type, size or industry sector. Most importantly, it can be achieved by any organisation under the right conditions.

Conclusion

In summary, innovation goes beyond continuous improvement. Innovation can be defined as novelty that is useful and requires new ways of thinking. The innovation process is universal and has discrete steps, which involve a blend of insight, imagination, analysis and action. Individuals have distinct natural preferences or biases for each of these steps that can be measured. Ultimately, however, innovation is the product of teamwork and synergy. This synergy is only achieved if team members understand and engage in the innovation process by systematically adjusting their individual natural preferences to the innovation process itself, while working together towards a common goal. Innovation is hindered or supported by organisational culture and climate. Finally, innovation requires supportive leadership, discipline, commitment and sufficient allocation of resources.

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He is currently working with a large client base of organisations (from both private and public sectors), assisting in the promotion and development of innovative thinking, managing organisational change, and improving employees' personal effectiveness, teamwork and productivity.

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