



Improvisational Innovation™

Two Words That Will Turn Employee Ideas Into Execution

Deborah Perry Piscione

At about nineteen years old, we all had to figure out what we wanted to do when we grew up (the time that many of us had to declare a major in college).

Now, I ask, did you know what you wanted to do at nineteen years old? Most people are just getting their sea legs on to explore the world around them. Thus, we were forced to establish a major at nineteen years old and it then dictates the path in our life... *for the rest of our life.*

Here's a hypothetical scenario to prove how ridiculous it is to choose a career at nineteen you are not likely right for, and yet are beholden to it for the remainder of your life. Your dad is an accountant so you get a degree in accounting. Do you love it? Do you even like it? It doesn't matter, because chances are you and the world will peg you as an accountant for the rest of your life.

But what happens if fifteen years down the road, you are married with two kids and spending much more time on the home front. You read an article in *Popular Mechanics* magazine on how to homebrew a basic robot, and it inspires you. It gets your juices flowing, a feeling you have not had since your wedding night. You start tinkering around in your garage and a few years later you have not only become quite a brilliant hobbyist in robotics, but you invent a new robotics sensory that navigates the robot from florescent lighting—something that no one else in your own company has figured out, but could greatly benefit from.

What do you do...who do you turn to? You decide to go to an engineer in the Chief Technologist's office (perhaps you are not aware that there is a robotics team or you are aware, but the team is based in India). Now, in all due respect, you are a financial analyst and stereotypically you look and dress like this (I'll leave the physical characteristics up to your imagination, but envision the bald guy in the conservative suit). The engineer (visualize Mark Zuckerberg) you assume is a whiz kid, and seemingly about half your age. There is nothing remotely apparent that you in common. You attempt to engage in conversation but realize the rhythm of the conversation is just not happening. You give up, and the organization has lost an opportunity to harness your brilliance, all because you got a degree in accounting.

That is tragic from that individual's standpoint, but it's just as big a problem for the company not utilizing that individual's potential. So, what is the remedy?

Creativity + Accessibility + Execution = Improvisational Innovation™

Improvisational Innovation™ solves the problem of the CEO who asks, “How can I learn about the good ideas floating around in the minds of my employees?” From the employee perspective, it answers the question, “what do I do if I have a great idea? Who do I turn to?” If an innovative culture is non-existent and/or a lack of trust exists throughout the organization, does the employee take the risk to share their idea with their own manager who might squash it, or who sees the value in a potentially good idea and opts to take credit for it himself? Does the organization even offer an incentive for an employee to want to share a good idea? These are some of the questions that get solved by implementing an Improvisational Innovation™ process.

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Improvisational Innovation™ is inviting participants across the organization to be in the moment, generating anything from incremental to groundbreaking innovations (five to 10 years down the road). In Improvisation Innovation™, you engage all the talents of your people, irrespective of job title, education level, pay grade, etc. Like any good improviser, you are listening actively, you are open to change, and you develop a feeling for the right moment to act. Improvisational Innovation™ creates a temporary space with no limits or rules to create barriers.

While good ideas exist everywhere, what most organizations struggle with is a team that can effectively execute. The methodology behind Improvisational Innovation™ can work for any organization, because it is accessible and a more pragmatic approach to building upon the assets a company currently has—driving smaller incremental steps while also increasing the chances of a major breakthrough. It focuses on accelerating ideas that advance the company and builds a culture that is fast and adaptive without interrupting the bottom line. Because this type of innovation encourages creative pursuits, it just might keep your greatest talent from jumping ship. If an organization can make space for an entrepreneurial type to access the resources and rewards of a big company, chances are the organization will have less of an attrition issue.

There are five factors behind the methodology of Improvisational Innovation.™ They are:

1 | Democratize the ideation platform so that great ideas can bubble up from anyone at any time. Inventors are currently defined and determined by the industry they are in, and curtail anyone else from participating. In big Pharma, for example, while innovation is market-driven, it is the scientists who have become the innovators. In software or SaaS (software-as-a-service), it is the CTO and the engineering team. In fashion, it is designers, and so on. In the innovation capital of the world, Silicon Valley, there is an adopted belief that every person is responsible for the success and failure of an organization. If other organizations adopted this same mindset, then it would allow for broader participation in the invention process. The powerful difference is that inspiration can come from everyone, in every role, in every corner of the company. However, in order to effectively democratize the ideation process, there has to be a standard of humility when one shares their ideas, and an environment of optimism so that anyone feels encouraged to propel their idea forward.

2 | Adopt a formalized process that will enable execution on a specific timeline. The inventor's idea needs to move from concept to prototype and beyond, with a complete understanding from all involved of what to do and how long it will take. A formalized process allows time for experimentation, additional staff support, financial investment, accelerated implementation, and adheres to a specific schedule that everyone is aware of, and will be able to efficiently move

from ideation to execution. The process will work best if you adopt a technology “sandbox” component, (SaaS or cloud based) to monitor, gate-keep and foster collaborative experimentation, and then apply appropriate business models.

3 | Ensure that the inventor has access to the right people at the right time. A great idea needs an advocate who can strengthen it and shepherd it through the organization, get it to the right people at the right time, and be on the hunt for a business unit to potentially fund and prototype it. Additionally, the inventor should network with colleagues outside of the business unit they work in, and even be able to detail over to the business unit where the invention best fits in. For example, if an idea comes from a financial analyst (who is a robotics hobbyist), but the idea is positioned for a robotics system unit, the inventor should have the opportunity to network and do a temporary work detail in that unit so he or she gains a deeper understanding of how that unit operates and how the invention best fits in. This will ensure that no viable ideas are left unattended.

4 | Reward the inventor. If someone has brought you a bold bet that results in significant revenue increase or cost savings, organizational leadership needs to recognize the inventor and his or her team, and reward them. The inventor should receive special recognition, be known for the product they invented, and have equity ownership in the product comparable to what a founder’s equity share would be outside of the corporation.

5 | Archive all ideas, good and not so good. Ideas not viable today might just be perfect in the future. Lyn Heward, the former president and chief operating officer of Cirque du Soleil, described how the company warehouses failed or unused show ideas, sometimes finding the perfect use for an idea a decade later. It also catalogs unique talent in every corner of the globe and uses this database as an inspiration for future shows. To continue with its mission to “constantly evoke the imagination, invoke the senses and provoke the emotions of people around the world,” Cirque du Soleil has developed some of the most advanced processes to enable groundbreaking innovation.

Improvisational Innovation™ puts the days of cost savings behind us, and positions companies to embrace growth and evolve into its next generation. It provides the right balance between creating the environment for people to have the freedom to experiment, and democratizes innovation participation rates, and in the process recognizes and rewards those individuals that bring new ideas to the organization. So, where’s the sweet spot for innovative success? To find out, leaders must be willing to answer—honestly—three seminal questions:

- 1** Do you truly understand what innovation is best for your own particular organization?
- 2** Do you understand how to innovate within your existing culture?
- 3** Do you understand how to motivate people who want to innovate beyond their day-to-day job?

At the moment, for most organizations, the answer to all three is likely no.

The Opportunity: The Transcendent Wonder of Innovation

The key to innovation, according to Dave Blakely, an electrical engineer who heads up the technology strategy practice at the design and innovation consultancy firm IDEO, is to suspend disbelief and focus on opportunities and inspiration rather than on the risk. What is Blakely's definition of innovation? "Innovation is creation resulting from study and experimentation." Therefore, it is a learnable skill for anyone, not some innate talent of a chosen few. "Want to have a good idea?" Dave Blakely asks. "Have a lot of ideas." Indeed, the companies that innovate best are those that have a myriad of ideas in process at once, with the recognition that nearly all, ultimately, will fail, along with a process to propel ideas forward iteratively. But, if just one becomes a commercial hit the experimentation is worth it.

There are generally three ways for organizations to innovate: (1) insource: organic innovation (often the gold standard); (2) outsource: hire a creative services firm like IDEO; or (3) buy: acquire an innovative company. Blakely has observed that many successful companies do a blend of these three ingredients for rapid innovation.

The key is for the mix of approaches to be decided mindfully and strategically. Too many organizations, Blakely points out, devise an innovation strategy by happenstance.

Improvisational Innovation:™ The Mindset

Improvisational Innovation™ is today's cultural component that answers every CEO's, CTO's, and chief innovation officer's question: "What if my employees are walking around with the next big idea and I don't know about it?" It complements all other styles of innovation and builds an inclusive culture, where anyone and everyone can contribute ideas regardless of position, experience, education, and the like.

It is a behavioral mind-set that:

- Supports the complete openness of ideas without judgment.
- Develops superior listening skills by using the ideas of one person to trigger the ideas of another.
- Rides the wave of idea creation until the momentum slows or ends.
- Discards the limitations of the impossible.
- Engages impassioned discourse.
- Can happen at any moment, without preparation or a required result—unlike traditional planned brainstorming sessions.
- Allows a person to envision and create the job they inevitably may want.

In Improvisational Innovation™, organizational leaders must think of employees as entrepreneurs and the company as the venture capitalist who can fund, partner and commercialize a good idea. This is the starting point, and what follows is a string of six elements that need to be in place in order to effectively execute on that process.

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Those six elements are:

- 1 | There must be an engaged, proactive commitment of the executive leadership, starting with the CEO. Ideally, the CEO has skin in the game and allocates funds to serve as a venture capital fund should a particular idea not get adopted into a specific business unit.
- 2 | There must be an appropriate balance between risk-takers and more conservative members of an executive team so that on stone is unturned and an Improvisational Innovation™ process is best positioned for success.

- 3 | You must have entrepreneurial-type participants who are initially willing to explore and execute on their ideas on their own time.
- 4 | Once an idea is vetted and approved, you need to support the inventor fully and recognize that this idea has the potential to be a part of the future of the organization.
- 5 | If an idea is on the road to being commercialized, then you need to treat the inventor as a partner, offering a predetermined amount of equity in the product or process that generates a new revenue stream.
- 6 | Many ideas must be explored simultaneously with minimal investment and rapid prototyping.

The Language of “Yes, and... ”

In Improvisational Innovation™, it is critical to set an optimistic, “anything is possible” mind-set and a vernacular that encourages, not squashes, people’s enthusiasm and comfort to share ideas. Like the well-known improvisational game “Yes, and... ”, Improvisational Innovation™ combines creativity, awareness, momentum, and support all with a goal in mind. It starts with an idea, and each successive thought begins with “Yes, and... ” to build on the foundation. Such a brainstorming session might sound like this:

MITCH: For the launch of our new product line, I want to throw a party.

TERRY: Yes, and we can make it a themed event.

MITCH: Yes, and it can be something like a circus.

TERRY: Yes, and we can get one of those big tents with colorful flags.

MITCH: Yes, and we can bring in clowns and pony rides for the kids.

TERRY: Yes, and we can have hot dogs and cotton candy.

And so on.

This is not just an exercise in semantics. A culture that uses “No” during the idea stage cuts ideas off, shuts them down, and often wounds people in the process. Even more prevalent is the culture of “Yes, but...” which attaches judgments and conditions on an idea, limiting the possibilities. In both cases, these behaviors inadvertently discourage future participation. “Yes, and...” doesn’t mean that all ideas will prevail in first ideation or at all, but people will be more likely to risk sharing ideas or contributing in creative ways if there is not a sense of discouragement.

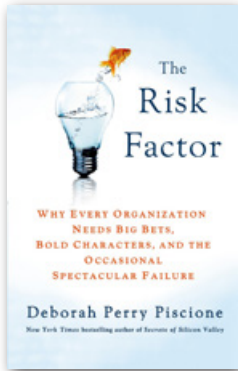
“Yes, and...” is a liberating practice that invites the spontaneous free exchange of ideas. It is also a key to great risk-taking and a behavior that, although it is poorly understood, most great leaders share, and is the key to building enterprise-wide risk-taking cultures.

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New ideas and bold bets are essential for the livelihood and survival of any organization operating in today's competitive marketplace and era of exponential growth. On the minds of many leaders is the question, "How do I know where the next big idea is, and what are the incremental or groundbreaking ideas that can be harvested from my employees?"

The methodology behind Improvisational Innovation™ addresses the answer of how to identify, source, data-mine and execute upon new ideas from any employee, at anytime. 📄

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Deborah Perry Piscione is a principal and cofounder at [Vorto Consulting](#), a Silicon Valley-based boutique-consulting firm dedicated to enabling companies to innovate and grow. She is the author of the newly released book, *The Risk Factor* (St. Martin's Press, 2014) the New York Times best-selling *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), and an Internet entrepreneur, board advisor, and nationally recognized speaker. A former congressional and White House staffer, she spent over a decade as a media commentator on CNN, CNBC, MSNBC, ABC, NBC, Fox News, PBS, and NPR programs, and her work has been covered in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, and *Forbes*.

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