

Leave Ego at the Door: 3 Keys to Unleash Innovations That Win



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We often conceptualize creativity and innovation as a solitary endeavor: a genius sitting alone in a room somewhere, crafting a masterpiece. Too often, we think innovation comes from the brain of a single (super)human—and that the ability to innovate is therefore an inherent capability that the rest of us can't aspire to.

It's true that sometimes innovation does come from one person, but far more often it's the result of amazing collaboration. It comes from a team of people working well together, building off one another's ideas to create something more than any one of them could have dreamed up alone.

What Makes This Kind of Amazing Collaborative Innovation Possible?

The best innovations share something in common: they aren't about the creators. Instead, they are fundamentally in service to others. They are about providing others with meaningful

products, services, or experiences that make their lives or work somehow better. This is true of any endeavor that benefits from creative thinking and ideas, including problem solving, process improvement, customer service, leadership, management and more.

All too often, however, collaborative innovation is hamstrung by individuals and their egos. We think we need to be that solitary genius. Even if we tell ourselves otherwise, deep down we feel challenged or think our ideas have no merit if they're built on or changed by our teammates. Driven by the need to be (or be seen as) cutting-edge, we can become so self-absorbed that we lose sight of other people's needs. This self-focus is what kills our chances of creating something truly innovative.

Disconnecting from the reality of others short-circuits innovation not only at an individual level, but at the organizational level as well. Low-innovation cultures reflect the egocentric, inward mindset held by their people, where individuals focus only on their own goals and results. This blindness—to the needs and objectives of colleagues, managers and customers—makes it impossible for people to anticipate what might be helpful to others, and means that efforts to innovate will inevitably fall short.

Stunningly creative innovation only happens if it's in response to the needs, challenges and desires of others. Born of genuine curiosity and a connection to other people, it requires a specific mindset. The good news is that this mindset can be learned, followed, and infused throughout the organization. Even in industries or environments hampered by regulation, mired in conflict, or fixated on personal credit and acclaim, committing to following this pattern—and maintaining the discipline it requires—can spark the mindset that leads to real innovation, the kind that springs an organization ahead of its competition.

This Process of Selfless, True Innovation Entails Three Specific Steps:

See Others: Begin with a shift to truly see other people. People who consistently achieve high levels of innovation pay attention to and are deeply curious about the people around them.

Adjust Efforts: Ego-free innovation responds to what is seen. Truly creative innovations with staying power and profound impact happen in response to the clearly understood needs and challenges of other human beings.

Measure Impact: It's vital to carefully gauge the impact of the innovation, and measure whether or not the effort enriches the lives of the people it's intended to affect.

This three-step pattern of successful innovation is embodied in the innovation process developed at Pixar. Holding true to the belief that the process is far more important than any single individual contributor, Pixar uses a different director on every film they produce. They have consistently achieved truly groundbreaking products over and over again. As Michael Arndt, the writer of Toy Story 3 noted, a great film requires that "its makers must pivot, at some point, from creating the story for themselves to creating it for others."

Asking the Right Questions

As a leader, you should question your company's approach to innovation—in your own work, your teams' work, and your entire organization's work. Ask all parties, including yourself, the following questions, which will enable you to achieve the level of creativity that leads to remarkable innovation:

What would it look like to pivot from doing your work for

yourself to doing it for others?

What would it look like to give yourself more completely to the people around you?

Wherever we are and whatever we do, this pivot marks the end of ego and the beginning of creative innovation. In prioritizing responsiveness to others over serving ourselves, we reach a level of innovation that indeed raises the bar, no matter what field we're in.

Want to learn more about ego-free creativity? Watch this [clip](#) of Mitch Warner speaking on this topic at the Cannes Lions Festival.