

Foster innovation by creating a learning and social networking environment for your teams

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Background



How many new ideas did your team have during the past 6 months? And how many were transformed to innovations?

With this post I'll try to share thoughts on becoming more innovative by building an environment that supports learning and social networking – as an important driver for innovation and being agile.

Learning as a key factor for innovation

Innovation is key to survive for many organisations.

Crucial elements for innovation are:



- knowledge, to be productive. **Innovation is fundamentally about learning.**
- creativity, to produce original and useful results
- motivation, to do something worth doing it
- diversity, adds robustness and flexibility to an organisation
- personality, result of people embracing a number of basic virtues

Given the rapid pace of change, the companies that will own the future will be those who learn “how to learn” the best.

Continuous learning will be the new competitive advantage.

Create a learning environment

“Innovate out loud. Your idea is worthless if no one cares about it, but it’s worth even less if no one knows about it.”

Combined with encouraging innovation among your team members:

- provide channels of distribution for ideas to be socialized with the team, across teams and throughout the company (without it you set great expectations but when ideas can’t spread and be transformed to innovations you can earn great frustration)
- help your team members to learn how to create internal and external coalitions for their creative ideas.



It’s a long way to an innovation – it needs time, the connection of several thoughts, experimentation and much more. You can support by:

- Enabling and foster hunch connection – the combination of thoughts that build a new idea (from one or more of your team’s brains). Think about your team’s communication behaviour and the team’s environment.
- Seek for diversity of your team members. Overcome the fear to work with not easy to lead team members and the tendency of Homophily – as it prevents you from building diversity.

- Creating a real space for experimentation and building an environment that welcomes failures as a fundamental part of learning. Structure and process are important – but do your best to free your team from it, to increase time spend with experimenting and innovating (consider your teams maturity level to increase process adaption steadily – a beginner team needs more structure than a high performance team that internalized the way to work best together).
- **Most great innovations were mostly evolutionary, not revolutionary. This implies that trying and also failing with things to enable the next step is necessary. The iterative approach of Scrum fosters evolution. The trick is to get more parts on the table and not only to think big thoughts.**
- **Foster creativity. Studies have shown that the companies that formally support creativity through programs are consistently the ones with the best new idea, the highest productivity, and the best morale.**

Diversity in your team

Thanks to Michael Lant for this post on this



Diversity helps your team to generate new ideas as different perspectives enlarge the solution space.

- Prefer having a small team with inspired out of the box thinkers (that may be hard to manage) than a team of drones.
- Make your team as diverse as possible. Try to include the broadest range of backgrounds as possible.

Consider diversity already in your hiring process

- **a sound technical background is important – not measured in years only but in how a candidate has used his experience to innovate**
- **search for excellent programmers but also with a broad range of experience – they bring more on the creativity table**

- consider if people have backgrounds in something completely different – like art, music, languages, family, ...
 - pay little attention to things like the number of years a person has spent with a particular technology or worked in a particular industry. Try to figure out if it was connected with doing the same again and again or if there was ongoing innovation done.
 - ask about innovations and inventions. What did they dreamed and created? Was it and why was it successful or failed (and what was learned)?
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What about the social networking?

Do you consider the social influence of new talent in your recruiting process?

Misleading criteria for hiring?

- Does the person have a degree? – It's a supporting element but can lead to the wrong direction if too much weight is put on it. Often people without the highest degree are really successful.
 - Number of years of work experience? – It needs more background to see what was really done during this time.
 - Number of years experience with a particular tool or language? – Does not automatically say something about the knowledge level.
 - Has the candidate built something like this before? – Can contradict the seek for diversity in your team.
 - Does everyone on the team give the person the “thumbs up” when they interview the candidate? – Supports Homophily and with this hinders diversity to emerge.
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Test with something where to see the solution approach?

E.g. Can you put the 3 things in an order – highest importance to lowest importance. And please explain why you decided this way:

- Hard work or work ethic
- Technical aptitude
- Communication

Read for more details on this (as I don't want to replicate all the existing nice thoughts on it.)

Pimp your team's environment

Scrum enables a high focus on delivering value. With the sprints it has a strong rhythm. It's in my opinion important to ensure time to breathe (given implicitly with the feedback

loops but sometimes not considered seriously enough).

In addition it should be supported by the management and your team's environment set up.

Ensure support and involve your management

Help your management to build a creative environment – ask for and foster:

- Safety – freedom to take risks and ask questions. Have the acknowledgement that failures are OK. **Failure means that something new was tried, and not all new things succeed. If nothing new is tried, then all you are doing is repeating what you've already done.**
- Play – play games by turning activities into little games (in your retrospective and throughout your daily work) – read Variations in your retrospective for some ideas on this
- Variation – as routine kills creativity
- Visibility – show creativity results within your team, across teams and the organisation
- Edge – try to get edge experiences (special challenges, can be bit scary) that widen the team's scope and move the team out of its comfort zone.

Too much order kills innovation but chaos avoids getting stable connections. *Try to find a balance.*

Welcome learning and give enough space

Enrich life with special moments where you escape the daily routine:

- go for a walk (alone and with your team)
- give your team members time to immerse themselves in a network of ideas
 - by considering concepts like the Atlassian's ShipIt days
 - having a dedicated experimenting time – regularly and long enough to achieve something.

Read across different sources in a short period – to enable more hunch connections.

To channel the idea creation – set some objectives – such as each team member must present their innovation work once per quarter to the whole team. What's produced must be related to the business you are in.

Make learning as simple as possible:

- no bureaucracy to order books (a book should be available within one day)

- maybe support with reading devices (like Kindles) – as the books are even faster available and it's fancy and supportive
 - paid by the company
 - learn how to learn – e.g. with speed reading techniques
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Optimize for having your team members working in the *FLOW* state.

- do your Scrum working sessions interfere – maybe it's good to move them to the end of the day
- reduce the noise level and prevent communication overlappings that wipe each other out
- minimize interruptions during the day

Focus on actionable items out of ideas to really get innovation implemented

Support networking

How do you encourage and foster social networking across your organization?

- Can your team members share ideas and information easily – via which media? Especially to strict visibility limitations or wrong tools prevent from networking.
 - Can they connect with others easily? By which ways and events?
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Consider the basic facts



It is important that neurotransmitters can really work efficiently.

- Ensure the right pace. If sometimes overhours are necessary – ensure compensation (and not only by money).
- What about sports? Maybe you can establish common team sports but at least share who's doing what kind of sports. I remember nice table tennis fights in my team 😊
- Consider the importance of food – nuts are brain energizers 😊 Go together for lunch and combine it with a common walk.
- Provide drinks for free – healthy water, coffee, juice

- Take your breaks and welcome some gossip during the day.
 - Clean your mind – I can highly recommend doing Yoga and Medidation.
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Embedd learning

- launch new products not only to sell them to customers, but as learning vehicles. Launch, learn, adjust, re-launch, and repeat as necessary.
 - Is learning adjunct to or integrated with everything you do?
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Sources

- [The Future of Innovation](#)
 - [The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization \(Century business\)](#)
 - <http://www.fastcompany.com/3002464/do-you-hire-iq-or-klout-score>
 - <http://michaellant.com/2010/08/26/how-to-build-a-high-performance-agile-team/>
 - <http://michaellant.com/2010/10/25/software-development-and-creativity/>
 - [Management 3.0: Leading Agile Developers, Developing Agile Leaders](#)
 - [Drive: Was Sie wirklich motiviert](#)
 - [Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation](#)
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Questions



How is your experience with innovations in Scrum teams?
Do you have additional actions? What also to consider for a good learning environment?