The Ten Faces of Innovation

Strategies for Heightening Creativity

by Tom Kelley with Jonathan Littman
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Take-Aways

• Commit your organization to innovation.
• Too often, playing devil’s advocate is a way to shoot down new ideas.
• Instead, try adopting other roles, or “faces.” Here are 10 possibilities:
• When you need to learn, play the “anthropologist,” the “experimenter” or the “cross-pollinator.”
• When you need to organize people, ask the “hurdler,” the “collaborator” or the “director” to help you.
• When you want to think creatively, try the roles of “experience architect,” “caregiver,” “storyteller” or “set designer.”
• Innovation is not only about devising new products. You can apply it to every process in your company – and far more cheaply than you might think.
• Make quick-and-dirty prototypes to generate lots of ideas.
• Shape organizational processes, spaces and interactions to support innovation.
• Paying close attention to what consumers really do and how they use your product will provide a nearly endless stream of ideas for improvements.

Rating (10 is best)

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Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How “playing devil’s advocate” squelches new ideas; 2) Which 10 brainstorming roles you can try instead; and 3) How to use these 10 roles to facilitate innovation.

Recommendation
Welcome to an enjoyable, easy read – which is not to dismiss Tom Kelley’s fine ideas. With the aid of Jonathan Littman, Kelley works throughout this book to show how innovation can be much more painless than most people think, and more fun. Kelley makes thinking collaboratively sound like a blast. In the process, he convinces you that your organization should nurture and cherish playing with ideas. Although he admits that his consulting company, IDEO, found itself grinding along on tedious projects at times, and that he has watched people shoot down perfectly good suggestions, his underlying message is one of open possibility. He presents 10 roles you can play during meetings, any one of which would be enough to add considerable value. By showing that these roles are temporary, he sends the message that if you want to stay competitive, you can change, and even must. As he examines everything from product names to rules governing how workers decorate their cubicles, Kelley demonstrates the many opportunities you have to create something new. The cost is often little or nothing; sometimes innovation simply means getting out of your employees’ way. getAbstract recommends this book to managers who wish to break old patterns and encourage creative thought companywide.

Abstract

Beat the Devil
You’ve probably attended more than one meeting in which a participant proposes a new idea only to have someone ask permission to “play devil’s advocate for a minute.” Just like that, he or she stomps on the new idea and stifles creativity. However, using role playing to experiment with ideas is not a bad tactic. Although the devil’s advocate role is negative, its effectiveness demonstrates that taking on a pretend persona can completely change what you see in a given situation. Role playing is a good way to encourage innovation.

The term “innovation” needs some explanation. The 3M Company defines it as “new ideas – plus action or implementation – that result in an improvement, a gain or a profit.” In fact, many ideas don’t go anywhere, so 3M’s inclusion of “action or implementation” in the definition is important. So far, so good. However, a complete definition of “innovation” should also emphasize the role of people – plural – in the process. Innovation doesn’t just “happen.” It requires determination and teamwork.

“Learning,” “Organizing” and “Building”
Role-playing can add energy and excitement to your meetings, and help your company stay on top of market changes. Ten roles you can use to nurture innovation fit into three categories:

1. “Learning roles” – The “anthropologist,” the “experimenter” and the “cross-pollinator” observe, create prototypes and explore what other disciplines have to say.
2. “Organizing roles” – The “hurdler,” the “collaborator” and the “director” connect and guide people, and overcome obstacles.

3. “Building roles” – The “experience architect,” the “set designer,” the “caregiver” and the “storyteller” build physical, psychological, emotional and linguistic structures that nurture innovation.

People can switch roles; no one needs to be stuck playing a particular one all the time. You don't need one person for each role in every situation: Three people might play seven of the roles, for example. The experience of swapping roles itself opens people to new ideas. Make a commitment to innovation organization-wide and over time, not just for one project. Try acting these roles:

1. “The Anthropologist”
   Anthropological researchers immerse themselves in alien cultures and observe carefully. This sort of intense observation is the single greatest source of innovation you can bring to your organization. View the world with what Zen Buddhism calls a “beginner’s mind.” Try to see everything as though you’ve never seen it before and watch what people do without judging them. Seek ideas everywhere: in your own intuition, in daily action and in the clutter around you.

   You can’t find out how customers use your products by asking them directly, because they will filter and clean up their responses for public presentation. Or, they simply may not know. So, watch what they do. Observe them in person or employ technological aids, such as videotaping. If you talk to them, ask open-ended, behavioral questions from several different angles. Don’t ask an adolescent, “What’s hot?” Instead, ask what he or she would buy with a certain amount of money. Visit a newsstand and buy a magazine you don’t usually read. You’ll see your culture and your customers differently.

2. “The Experimenter”
   You can recognize an experimenter immediately. Like Thomas Edison or, today, like James Dyson, the inventor of the bagless vacuum cleaner, experimenters are persistent about solving problems. They try lots of prototypes, make drawings, and build and test models. Then, they take what they learn and start all over again.

   Many people are reluctant to create prototypes because they think a prototype should impress those who see it – but that is not its purpose. If necessary, you can make a quick-and-dirty prototype out of things you’ve pulled from the trash. Your aim is to give your ideas a literal shape, so you and others can grasp them and then improve them. Compare two prototypes to discern what works and what doesn’t.

3. “The Cross-Pollinator”
   Cross-pollinators bring together disparate things. They take designs, practices and concepts from one discipline and they plunk them down in another, creating something new through “unexpected juxtaposition.” These juxtapositions can travel startling distances. The concept of punch cards came from the silk-weaving industry and IBM applied it to its early computers.

   To innovate, let your mind wander. No matter how counterintuitive it may seem, let go of your focus on your job. Read new things. Travel to new places. To encourage innovation, act as a cross-pollinator by underwriting educational experiences in any subject area for your employees, with the goal of broadening their minds. Organize regular “show-and-
tell” sessions among departments. Provide space for people from different disciplines to mix. Set up a speaker series. Hire people with diverse backgrounds. Encourage lateral thinking and simple curiosity. Try “reverse mentoring” by pairing an older professional with a younger one so they both learn another generation’s perspective.

4. “The Hurdler”

Hurdlers specialize in overcoming obstacles. You can’t defeat them by blocking the direct path to their goal – they’ll jump over it or work around it. Hurdlers treat every obstacle as an opportunity.

If, acting as a hurdler, you can solve a problem others can’t cure, you’ll reap huge rewards. However, prepare to face blockages. Inside the company, you may have to slip past rules that present hurdles. Resist the temptation to just “do your job.” Getting a successful project approved after the fact may be easier than getting it funded when it is still hypothetical. Outside forces will also erect hurdles. Experts may even dismiss your ideas, but keep going. Cargill, the food company, wanted to buy from cotton farmers in Zimbabwe, but it faced a hurdle: it discovered that “not enough currency existed in the local economy for the company to pay” the farmers, so Cargill printed its own “money.”

5. “The Collaborator”

Collaborators not only work well with others, they also generate connections among other people. They encourage teams from different disciplines to work together, mediate among parties and keep everyone on the same page. Collaborators may also broker deals among organizations, helping companies move from simple buyer-seller relationships into multifaceted, more profitable arrangements. For instance, when Kraft Foods and its vendor, Safeway, worked together, they were able to make better plans, improve their supply chain, and reduce handling and inventory costs. Consider these two unusual collaborative techniques:

1. “Unfocus Groups” – Rather than bringing together representative consumers, as you do in a focus group, gather the most extreme, creative consumers for an unfocus group. Then, learn from watching participants respond to one another’s ideas.

2. “Cross-training” – Provide training in one discipline to employees in another.

Of course, forming work teams is a kind of collaboration. You can formally train employees in teamwork skills or, informally, you can have work teams play a sport together. Whether you use formal or informal collaborative techniques, harness the energy of “opponents” and bring them into the fold. Celebrate collective rather than individual successes.

6. “The Director”

Directors are planners and organizers. While collaborators may work on relatively routine projects, directors are visionary and ambitious. They start new ventures and enlist people to work on them. Being a director requires taking risks and exercising leadership. Hire the best people and lead them in brainstorming sessions. Record the good ideas that result. Let others take the spotlight. Give your projects striking names to draw employees to them.

Put someone who can act as a director in charge of an innovation initiative. In this job, the director would develop goals, find resources, establish the criteria for success, protect the initiative, reward people for supporting it and create an atmosphere of trust, where everyone could speak with honesty and without fear.
7. “The Experience Architect”
Experience architects present ideas by appealing to the senses. They’re interested in aesthetic pleasure as well as understanding. Expert experience architects use technology to give their audiences new experiences, but even untrained people can act as experience architects if they focus on the five senses. For example, someone in the role of an experience architect would use his or her personal reactions to evaluate the experiences of consumers by tracking “the customer journey,” including waiting time, background music, physical comfort and ease of purchase. This involves following every step a customer takes when interacting with your organization. The consumer probably takes more steps than you thought – giving you more areas to improve.

8. “The Set Designer”
Set designers focus on making physical space both functional and pleasing. For example, to take on the role of a set designer, consider whether your organization’s space enhances and encourages innovative thought. Create this effect by arranging desks and hallways so people can gather easily in impromptu groups. Encourage informal talk. Repeal restrictions on how people use and decorate their individual spaces. Reorganize offices to encourage people of different departments to spend time together. Move workers around on a project-by-project basis. Provide materials for recording and showing ideas, and designate wall space for displaying the results.

Think of the bedside manner of the best doctor or nurse you ever had, or the calm nurturing that an ideal parent provides. Caregivers, who work well with experience architects, have the ability to put people at ease, but their main concern is providing good service. Caregivers seek ongoing relationships with customers as individuals, as well as with the larger community. They build a sense of shared identity that can help build brand loyalty. In a world increasingly dominated by automated services, caregivers wish to revive the personal touch – and the smile.

Unlike facts, stories forge “emotional connections” between the teller and the audience. Storytellers can take the ordinary and reshape it into something special, creating inspirational myths and allegories. The storyteller’s goal is to create meaning, not entertainment. He or she seeks the truth and speaks with an authentic voice, both as an individual and as a representative of your organization.

Adopting the persona of the storyteller brings you full circle, back to the anthropologist, because a major part of the storyteller’s role is to listen. To act as a storyteller, ask open-ended questions, then take what you hear and weave it into a structured narrative. Such stories bring teams together. They express ideas and experiences that people may not have been able to discuss. Innovation can be chaotic and scary. A good storyteller “helps make order out of chaos” and makes the “vocabulary of change” familiar. Good stories make work enjoyable and meaningful.

About The Authors

Tom Kelley, who wrote The Art of Innovation, is managing director of IDEO, a creative design and innovation consultancy. Jonathan Littman is a contributing editor of the magazine Red Herring, and author of The Fugitive Game and The Watchman.