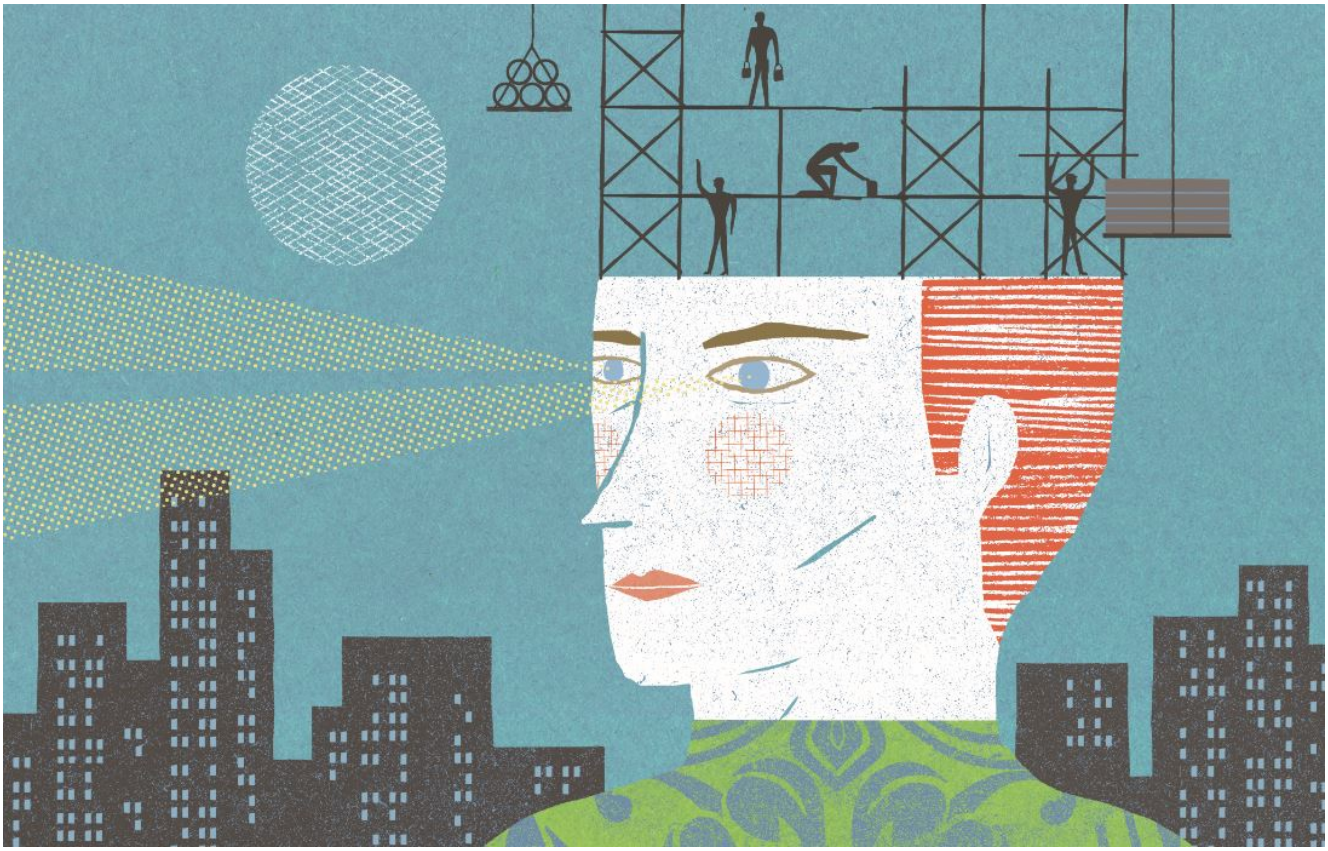
Clearing the path to innovation

How to be an innovation architect: the 5+1 behaviors that leaders need to foster in their employees to make innovation happen in their everyday business.



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“Keep an open mind.” Who hasn’t heard this piece of advice? It is one of the most commonly shared insights in management courses on innovation. But how do you actually do it?

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Keeping an open mind is not that hard when you are participating in a two-day innovation workshop and the professional facilitator has just told you to withhold judgment. But what about the other 363 days of the year? What about when it is late on Wednesday afternoon, you are stuck in the meeting from hell, your smartphone won't stop buzzing, the budget report still isn't finished, you're late for that dinner with the in-laws, and the guy who took the last coffee didn't refill the pot again?

This is the kind of scenario in which people often find themselves when they are suddenly ambushed by a new idea. In such situations, well-meaning exhortations to "keep an open mind" or "to listen carefully to new ideas" are quickly forgotten.

The problem is not so much that people don't understand the logic of listening, but rather that when they need their listening skills most, they are invariably captives of a stronger, more powerful logic — namely, that which resides in the architecture of their workplace.

So how can leaders make innovation happen in their everyday business? As a manager, how do you make your employees better at creating results by doing new things?

First and foremost, you need to understand that fostering innovation is not just about getting people to *think* differently. If you want to make innovation happen, you need to change the way people *act or behave* in their daily work. And the best way to do that is to change the environment they work in.

By stepping into the role of "innovation architect," you can transform your corporate ecosystem into one that supports a stronger, more sustainable culture of innovation.

This article will help managers take a new approach to the leadership role and think differently about how to foster innovation in their companies. It stems from observations we have made through many years of direct collaboration with companies.

Personality vs. environment: an age-old question

In the early days of behavioral studies, the psychologist Kurt Lewin coined what is considered by many to be the most famous equation in the social sciences: *Behavior = Personality x Environment*.

Lewin's point was that, in any given moment, our behavior can be understood as the result of the interaction between two things: who we are, and the setting we are in.

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However, if you look at many of today's writings on innovation, you would be forgiven for thinking that personality was the only factor in the equation. Just take the following quote from a *McKinsey Quarterly* article (emphasis ours): "Success depends on *persuading* hundreds or thousands of groups and individuals to change the way they work, a transformation people will accept only if they can be *persuaded to think differently* about their jobs. In effect, CEOs must *alter the mindsets of their employees* — no easy task."

We call this *the mindset approach*, and it has come to dominate much of the thinking on innovation. According to this approach, your job as a leader is to cajole, change values and make people think differently.

One consequence of such thinking is that leaders have come to see innovation as primarily a communication challenge. They urge their teams to "think outside the box" — whatever that means — and they hire motivational speakers to boost morale and reenergize staff, as if they were toys in need of fresh batteries. Company-wide values programs are initiated, training programs are run, and hordes of hapless employees are sent off to change-management courses.

However, as Lewin's equation reminds us, changing someone's mind is not the only way to change their behavior. Altering their environment can have just as much impact. As such, managers struggling to improve the performance of their workers should consider how the company's organizational environment promotes or inhibits innovative behavior.

This is not to say that the mindset approach is not without merit. If well-executed, the method may sometimes generate useful results, at least in the short term.

But the aim of an innovation architect is not just to generate a great new idea or two: It is to create systemic and sustainable innovation, to embed creativity in the DNA of the workplace. And the only way to do that is to change the system itself.

Fight systems with systems

Like a real architect, the innovation architect affects people's behavior indirectly by shaping their environment. Yet whereas real architects work primarily with physical surroundings, the innovation architect addresses the sum of the physical, social and professional environments in which people work.

It is about rethinking what *Nudge* authors Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein call the "choice architecture" of the workplace. The choice architecture, as we use the term here,

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encompasses all the external systemic factors that influence people's behavior at work: the systems and structures, processes and places, strategies and policies, and even shared habits and routines.

Being an innovation architect may require changing the way you think about systems and creativity. Creative people, for example, generally have strained relations with systems, structures, standards and other perceived constraints on their creative freedom. Nowhere is this clearer than in big organizations where people often complain that "the systems" kill creativity, and they longingly hearken back to the halcyon days when the company was younger, nimbler and less bureaucratic.

But returning to those frenetic startup days is not an option. Instead, established companies require a different kind of innovation: They need a culture in which creativity forms a natural part of the corporate ecosystem.

As such, the key to building a creative culture is not to declare war on systems, processes and policies, but to embrace and redesign them so that they support and actively enhance innovative behavior.

Managers, in other words, have to *fight systems with systems*, in order to create an architecture of innovation across the entire organization.

The 5+1 behaviors of innovation as usual

The challenge of making people bring great ideas to life is that it encompasses a massively broad spectrum of different behaviors, not all of which are equally vital to the task.

In researching and writing our book on this subject, *Innovation as Usual*, we discovered some key behaviors of innovation, which we believe companies ought to foster in their employees. We call those the 5+1 keystone behaviors of innovation. By using the 5+1 framework as a diagnostic tool, you can identify the biggest behavioral bottlenecks to innovation in your own business and focus on fixing them.

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