

Human side of innovation:

Four hallmarks of innovation leaders

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Every organization says it wants to be more innovative. Some pursue innovation with a focus on adopting the latest technology. Some seek opportunities to fine-tune existing processes or find more productive ways of working. Others forge partnerships that enable entirely new revenue streams.

Organizations that are consistently innovative know that none of those is the true key to success. They recognize that the best innovations are born from human curiosity and creativity—through the collaboration and synergy of individuals and teams.

At KPMG Ignition, we call this the human side of innovation, and we believe every organization can harness it more fully. As you reflect on the human side of innovation within your own organization, consider how you can better emulate four behaviors of innovation leaders.

01

Embrace a culture of disruption

Your culture is critical to unleashing the full potential of human ingenuity. People need to know that the organization wants bold disruption of the status quo. This can't be mere lip service. People need to see recognition and rewards for colleagues who are disruptors and risk takers. They need to know it's safe to fail. Indeed, failure should be seen in a positive light—as a learning moment that helps you get closer to a goal.

In a large, established organization, it may be challenging to spark that kind of universal culture change. In that case, consider building a formal structure within the enterprise or spin off a separate company dedicated to innovative thinking.

INSPIRING INNOVATOR:

Housing rental start-up

Fostered by a disruptive culture by challenging the traditional hospitality industry and redefining the concept of accommodations, this company transformed the travel and lodging sector by encouraging bold, innovative thinking among employees and embracing creative risk-taking.





INSPIRING INNOVATOR:

Tech industry leader

Known for identifying innovation standouts by bringing together top engineers, designers, and creatives to form special “moonshot” teams that work on groundbreaking and ambitious projects such as self-driving cars.

02

Find the innovation standouts

While innovation can and should be the mission of everyone in an organization, some people are more inclined to look and think beyond the proverbial box. These are the rockstars, rebels, and rogues. They’re interesting and interested. And they aren’t afraid to break new ground.

In each department, find the innovation standouts. Bring them together in small, cross-functional teams. Then give them basic guardrails, but for the most part, let them self-govern. If you build more than one of these teams, you can start to propel innovation in phases—with one team laying the groundwork before handing it off to another to make further progress.

03

Foster radical transparency

Be clear about how the organization defines innovation and what success looks like. Don’t say you want to achieve “next-level” growth; announce that you’re aiming for 10 percent growth.

To forge innovation, empower people to cast off old assumptions and pose challenging questions. In traditional, bureaucratic organizations, dissent may be seen as a liability, and speed may be viewed as a risk. But as you nurture the human side of innovation, both become assets. With your people aligned around your innovation vision and goals, they can begin to test new directions and move much faster while staying in control.

INSPIRING INNOVATOR:

Leader in the financial information industry

Fostered by a disruptive culture by challenging the traditional hospitality industry and redefining the concept of accommodations, this company transformed the travel and lodging sector by encouraging bold, innovative thinking among employees and embracing creative risk-taking.

04

Implement deliberate experimentation

Sometimes innovation initiatives become experimentation by design, with an emphasis on “exploring what’s possible.” That can be interesting and helpful, but it may not make enough impact.

Instead, consider experimentation with intent: Name a target business outcome. Establish a preliminary plan and allocate a short period of time. Then give an individual or team the assignment and let them get to work. See what they’re able to produce when freed from the constraints of status-quo thinking and bureaucratic barriers. Encourage them to push themselves to their breaking point—knowing that you will catch them if they fall.





Three key questions for every C-suite leader:

How are we fostering a culture of openness, curiosity, and creativity within our organization to encourage human-centered innovation?

In what ways are we empowering and supporting our employees—particularly the rockstars, rebels, and rogues—to drive innovation within their respective domains?

Are we transparently communicating our vision for innovation and providing the necessary resources and support for our employees to ideate, experiment, and transform ideas into viable solutions?

Tap into the power of human ingenuity

Humans are curious. We're creative. And when faced with even the most daunting challenges, we're willing to rise and meet the moment. Human ingenuity is what got us to the moon in the 1960s. It's what will help us realize the promise of quantum computing in the no-longer-distant future. And it's what can help your organization break new ground as you meet your mission, power growth, and make a bigger, better impact in business and society.

Start your journey. [Reach out today.](#)

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