

How to Host an INNOVATION WEEK



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Innovation and the ideas that fuel it have become a business necessity. Not only is it a main driver of economic progress, but of social well-being. In most companies, however, innovation is a responsibility given to a small group with a handful of people who have a specific job title or degree that 'qualifies' them to innovate. What happens when you need a new perspective from anyone else in the company?

Nothing.

The [McKinsey Global Innovation Survey](#) points out that while 84 percent of executives agree that innovation is important to their growth strategy, only 6 percent are satisfied with their innovation performance. This raging gap between the value execs assign to innovation and their happiness rating is a recipe for disaster. It's a sign that there's a lack of clarity throughout the organization of the importance of innovation, people's roles in making it happen on a daily basis, and their skills to contribute.

The charge, then, is to create an environment in which innovation and innovative thinking can happen on the spot in any area of the business. To do that, employees need to understand the bigger picture of the company, its priorities, have the opportunity to work on ideas that matter to them, and be given the time and space (mentally and physically) to invest in these skills.

Enter the Innovation Week.

Set the Vision of Innovation

Any number of companies list innovation as a core value. Yet few clearly define it much less support the values and behavior that make it a reality.

Innovation weeks are a unique five-day approach that give every employee of a company the opportunity to step outside their comfort zones and push their innovative thinking and problem-solving skills. It adds energy to ideas, gives people autonomy to work on what matters most to them, and motivates and inspires teams. It's also the first step in accelerating the impact of innovation at scale.



Companies that prioritize innovation by setting aside an entire week to focus on it experience:

- A willingness by employees to step outside their comfort zones
- A break in the day-to-day routine which energizes everyone
- A greater understanding of where the company's headed and how they can contribute

It's easy to get stuck in the churn of daily demands...endless email, sliding deadlines, time-sucking meetings, and bureaucracy and hurdles at every turn. Having time to focus on innovation on top of all of this seems impossible.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Innovation weeks provide three characteristics of idea advancement that are critical to progress...

- **Time to work on an idea.** Everyone gets bogged down with the minutia of their job. "How am I supposed to add innovation *on top* of everything I'm already doing?" is the common complaint. Give employees dedicated time when they know it's safe to pursue ideas. Promote and reward participation as much as you do other behaviors in your company.
- **A looming deadline that forces focus.** Many execs fear that letting the entire employee population in on innovation means they'll end up herding cats. With a specific time frame and clearly defined expectations for outcomes, people don't have time to flounder. The pressure of a deadline both excites and motivates people to take action.
- **The right people involved.** Companies have talented people with original ideas. But they can't bring them to fruition by themselves. Being a part of a multi-disciplinary team creates ways for everyone to learn something new, both personally and professionally.

5 Keys to a Successful Innovation Week

Companies that experience success with Innovation Weeks have six common characteristics in common.



1. Focus from the top

Focus stems from purpose. And the purpose of any company is set and affirmed from the CEO. If you want employees to get better at finding opportunities for the business, solve problems more collaboratively across departments, and invest in the thinking and skills to make it happen, it takes leadership to communicate its value. While individual initiative and support from team leads matters, nothing outranks the clear message from the top that innovation is everybody's business.

2. Inspire innovation as DNA

Who is someone your employees look up to as an innovator? It could be an icon like Richard Branson or Arianna Huffington. Or someone as accessible as a local business leader or original thinker. The point is to kick off the week by having someone who can tell the story of innovation, the impact in their own world, share their experiences of successes and failures, and pass along some of what they've learned. Hearing how they made innovation a deeply engrained part of their culture will help it start to hit home for your own employees.

Companies that foster a culture of innovation believe that innovation is everybody's business. It's not something that only one department does or people with a specific degree.

3. Dedicated time

It's called an *Innovation Week* for a reason.

In their book [Sprint](#), Googlens John Knapp, John Zeratsky and Brandon Kowitz break down the five-day process they developed while creating a structured innovation program that brought employees from all areas of the company together. You can adapt their approach and apply it to your Innovation Week like this:

- **Monday.** Start with the end in mind and agree to a long-term goal. Map the challenge out and ask the experts on your team and in your company what they know. Pick a target, an ambitious but manageable piece of the problem that you can solve in a single week.
- **Tuesday.** Come up with your solution by mixing and remixing ideas to improve them. Then, start sketching what you imagine your prototype looking like.



Don't worry about not being the artistic type, focus on the simplicity. Boxes, circles and arrows that show flow are all the more sophisticated you need to get. These will become part of your plan for a prototype and test.

- **Wednesday.** By now, you have a stack of options for your ideas. Start to whittle them down by looking at which ones have the best chance of hitting your long-term goal. If you have quite a few, prioritize them. As you work through them, you may realize that one won't work, and you'll need another waiting in the wings. Then take your sketches from Tuesday and weave them into a storyboard.
- **Thursday.** Here's where your theory begins to become reality. You'll take the storyboard that you created and in a single day, create a prototype of your idea. Your team will also need to put together a presentation for tomorrow. You'll show the rest of the company the problem you came to tackle, your approach, the prototype of your solution, and where you expect it to go from here. Don't skimp on this part. You need to make sure you deliver a cohesive story that everyone can understand and gets them excited about what you came up with.
- **Friday.** Today's the day! You'll present all that your team has developed in the last four days. Depending on how many teams you have involved in Innovation Week, you may need to reserve the entire day for demos. The key to making Innovation Week completely memorable is how you end it. Make a point of adding fun to this part of the event. Invite 'celebrities' to be the judges. This could be executives in the company, industry leaders, local personalities, whoever you can think of who would add flare and entertainment.

4. Awareness of teams

While innovation needs to be supported from the top down, nothing replaces the impact it has on teams. In the regular 9 to 5, people rarely have the chance to interact with people outside their immediate area of responsibility.

An Innovation Week is an opportunity for teams to put their talents, time, and energy to good use. They'll dig into ideas and tackle challenges together. They'll have conversations with people they barely know about concepts that are new to everyone.



This is a chance when your company's employees can all learn from each other. They'll forget about departments, silos, and reporting structures. They'll focus on strategy, planning and execution. Because they all share a common purpose, they'll not only build their hard skills at specific tasks, they'll also hone the always-important soft skills that help them collaborate better, build consensus, and understand the importance of trust.

5. Setting high-quality objectives

Often, companies focus on incremental improvement because they're less risky. But to encourage true innovation, focus on the big picture. Employees need to connect their work with their company's goals. For Innovation Week, it's a chance to break the bigger pictures down into chunks that people feel they can do something about. If one of your company's objectives is to increase customer retention, then think about creating a theme for the week that supports it. Perhaps it's around on-boarding clients and making it a delightful and talk-worthy experience.

Does all of this seem like more trouble than it's worth? Then you don't believe in the power and potential of innovation.

An Innovation Week at a well-known bank inspired an idea to solve the issue of friends splitting the cost of sharing bills. It would become a feature within the existing banking app and allow users to share group bills and send texts to their friends. They were able to tell them how much they owe, their bank details, and give them a unique reference number that could later be used to track when a friend paid them.

The feature targeted a younger audience who shared bills on a regular basis. The new concept was an opportunity that no other bank was offering and would allow the brand to target a new audience and source of revenue.

Innovation Week is Just the Beginning

Innovation Weeks serve as a marketplace of fresh ideas. They also help build rapport, support and a positive work culture—all things that are genuinely important to the performance of every company, but also feel elusive, or time-consuming and expensive to invest in. In a matter of five days, your company can see a remarkable difference in employee engagement, critical thinking, and a mindset that helps identify opportunities like never before. Employees gain a new understanding of teamwork



and how they can use their newly developed skills in their everyday work. They've built bonds and comradery across silos, have a greater level of trust, and more willingness to collaborate. Ultimately, this creates a higher level of trust in every corner of the business, which is foundational for innovation to happen.

Work With Us



Carla Johnson and her team have worked with startups, Fortune 100 companies and every size in between. They've helped executives and leaders understand their starting points, design their innovation journey, and deliver the research, training, advice and experiences to help them make innovation a mindset. Through partnerships, clients learn the impact that a broader innovation practice

has on business, and the path to creating and sustaining a culture that welcomes new ideas, encourages experimentation, and rewards critical thinking.

This is how companies of all size become genuinely nimble, passionate, innovative powerhouses that deliver extraordinary outcomes in any industry and under any market condition. Look for her latest book, [*RE:Think Innovation*](#), and visit www.carlajohnson.co for more information or to get in touch.