

7 Ways to Inspire Innovation

By Robert F. Brands

Author of Robert's Rules of Innovation: A 10-Step Program for Corporate Survival



The recently introduced Apple iPad is the latest wowing of the world by the pioneering computer company. Taken in totality, with its iPhone, iPod, MacBook laptops, and the original Macintosh computer itself, Apple's ability to hit innovation home runs has changed technology -- and the way people relate to electronic devices, and thus, each other.

What was the inspiration behind these products? How does a man -- CEO Steve Jobs, who co-founded Apple with Steve Wozniak -- foster such an upwelling of inspiration? How does leadership's vision motivate teams in the organization, and ultimately transform consumers into loyalists? More importantly, how can you foster such inspiration in your organization?

Start with the question: How inspired is your organization? In a survey on InnovationCoach.com website, we asked, "Which elements of an Innovation Process and/or culture are in place today?" Only half the respondents answered "Inspiration." The good news was that half of those responding realized the need for inspiration. The bad news was that just as many don't -- or haven't put the process in place.

From the C-suite on down, can you honestly say that your company encourages inspiration and welcomes vision? Or does your organization "play not to lose?" Is it a pulse that beats constantly?

Inspiration goes beyond the thinking that brought us various Apple products. Inspiration is about how people think, collaborate, and then put new ideas into motion. Inspiration comes in an open forum for all involved and not involved. It reaches from the CEO to the customer service help desk, from the factory floor to the retail showroom, from the longest-tenured employee to the newest hire, to the customer submitting concepts via a "Suggestions" box or a phone call. Savvy innovators even welcome partners, suppliers, and vendors into the process.

To my way of thinking, no one in the organization gets a "free pass" from thinking creatively about how to improve the company, its products or its processes.

While thoughtful leadership has fueled innovation for other businesses, inspiration remains the spark that drives the creative process. How can your organization inspire innovation? I suggest these seven tips:

- **Make inspiration an imperative.** In *Robert's Rules of Innovation*, it states that successful innovation in an organization is driven by 10 imperatives, including -- among others -- leadership, ownership, accountability, risk and reward, and value creation. None is more important, though, than inspiration. An inspired leader, organization and process engages the team, welcomes them into the act of innovation and heightens chances for success.
- **Install and empower a chief innovation officer.** The processes of inspiration and innovation need a champion, someone who helps develop the ideas, fosters an environment that encourages creative camaraderie, feeds esprit de corps, and steers the organization toward greatness. In the small or mid-sized companies, this should be the owner or CEO. In large organizations with an especially thoughtful or charismatic leader -- such as Steve Jobs -- the CEO can serve this role as well. But generally in larger organizations, the CIO should be someone empowered by the CEO. The CIO (not to be confused with the Chief Information Officer) has the perspective of the organization to envision inspiration, and drive to push projects through the various necessary pipelines, and the power and purpose to see projects through.
- **Set goals and create enthusiasm.** Where do you want your organization to go today? Tomorrow? Does the company need one new product this year, or a new process management or workflow initiative? Inspiration is the daily communication that steers such direction. Though the CIO is the leader (after the CEO or other top exec), the team must embrace the challenge as a shared goal to be met together. Buy-in comes with smaller, incremental wins that need to be recognized. Failures must be tolerated, not penalized. Measure achievements, and use a reward system of monetary or recognition awards. You'll find sometimes, especially with your most creative people, that recognition is reward enough to keep troops engaged and motivated.
- **Create the right culture.** Inspiration is bigger than individuals: It resonates throughout the organization. This is more than hanging motivational posters on the walls. Host regular brainstorming sessions to welcome new ideas. Hold team-building exercises, where inspiration is the focus, and new ideas -- again for products or processes -- are the goal. Successful inspiration that fuels innovation transcends hierarchy and silos. It's not just the CIO's job. It's everyone's job. Together, the

team enjoys success and learns from the lessons of failure. Encourage the entire organization to become "Inspired" and to embrace the challenge of inspiration.

- **Make inspiration a start-to-finish endeavor.** On its album *Dark Side of the Moon*, Pink Floyd laments, "plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines." Life and business are littered with unfinished tasks. Set deadlines, and use rewards to help ensure they are met. Strive for the completed task.
- **Observe, measure, and know.** Inspiration -- like innovation itself -- doesn't happen in a vacuum. It must be measured to gauge performance and ensure a chance at success. Each project team must have a leader in charge of shepherding projects to their respective waypoints and end goals. Set up processes and milestones. Establish checkpoints to weigh accomplishments. As Ronald Reagan famously said: "Trust, but verify."
- **Never relent.** Inspiration is about the journey, not the destination. It's not a one-time endeavor, but a life-long calling. Herb Kohler, the 70-year-old bearded chairman of the plumbing fixture company that bears his name, still heads Kohler's monthly new product development meetings -- that is, when he's not collaborating with legendary golf course designer Pete Dye on a new development or leading the company's acquisition of Scotland's famed Hamilton Hall in St. Andrews. At a time when his contemporaries are content to just hit the links, Kohler remains committed to product innovation -- and helping to provide the inspiration behind it.

Inspiration sparks, propels, and steers creative thinking, which leads to innovation and, thus, new business development. Establishing, maintaining and fostering a culture in which this thinking can thrive not only motivates teams and encourages shared goals -- it ultimately drives value to the bottom line. Inspire and keep the beat.

About the author:

Robert F. Brands, author of *Robert's Rules of Innovation: A 10-Step Program for Corporate Survival*, is President and founder of Brands & Company, LLC (www.innovationcoach.com). Having gained hands-on experience in bringing innovation to market, creating and improving the necessary product development processes and needed culture, he delivered on his charter to bring "at least one new product per year to market" -- resulting in double-digit profitable growth and share-holder value.