

What it takes to be creative and innovative¹

By Angelica Larios, DSL, MBA, PMP

In a time of crisis or incertitude, such as the ones we live with the pandemic, people tend to create or try new ways to solve new problems. Without a doubt, one of the most evident changes has been the remote work and classes, that thanks to the current technology, the world found a way to give continuity and "normality" to this new world. For Project Managers is not different at all; not only the pandemic, but every single project we start or manage always faces challenges that we need to solve or turn around.

Of course, experience, knowledge, soft skills, and so on have a lot to do when trouble solving times come. Reaching out of previous experiences, searching for proven solutions, and asking for advice are all reasonable steps that most project managers have used several times. However, creativity is a bit of internal flame that could be cultivated when all resources have failed. We can find a better solution or even innovate in whatever we are doing as our main activity.

Innovation and creativity

Innovation and creativity are topics in vogue; everybody seems to be interested in being creative and innovative. With so many examples, such as Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, it seems like innovation is a gift and that becoming the next king of the invention comes naturally and comfortable. The truth is that no matter how easy the innovation process appears to be or is presented in front of our eyes, there is a story behind every product, service, or leader that has transformed life as we know it.

Innovation implies adopting a **new idea, new procedure or behavior**, or a mix of all elements described. Innovation can be put in place from different angles, such as technical innovations that include a new process and new products or services or administrative changes referring to new procedures, policies, and organizational forms, according to Jiménez. For any organization, innovation represents the opportunity to grow and survive and influence the industry's direction significantly. Innovation is not only a weapon in competitive markets, but it can also turn out into social change, or social entrepreneurship, says Davila et al.

On the other hand, "according to expert Michalko, creativity is not an accident, not genetically determined. It is not a result of some easily learned magic trick or secret, but **a consequence of your intention to be creative and your determination to learn and use creative thinking strategies.**" This becomes a relevant paradigm change because,

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as project managers or leaders, we can be creative by using creative thinking strategies to get a different result.

The source of innovation comes from different paths

Hard-working in a specific direction. - Innovators select a problem to focus all their attention and energy to solve, pass much time thinking about several solutions or possibilities to resolve their issues, and when they have this instinct, then start the experimental phase. "The majority of innovations come from dedicated people in a field working hard to solve a well-defined problem, asserts Berkun."

The shift in the first direction. – Often, innovators could become stubborn enough to what they want to accomplish, and its resilience makes them work almost restlessly. However, when the first direction seems far away, and they "discover" something useful in the middle of their way, they start analyzing if this invention can be helpful for others. This way, while pursuing an original idea can turn into something exciting and practical to use.

Curiosity. This motivator is like an internal motor, this innate need to know everything, be curious about the world around us, how things are made, how things can be undone, and the challenge of trying to re-build some item with old pieces. Curiosity comes from the urge to know something new, pass the time, or have fun. This way, many things have been discovered or invented as creativity can be unlimited for a curious mind.

Wealth and money. - Another source of innovation is located in the opposite spectrum. People that feel the need for recognition or power or both. This is often the case where they are searching for more related to status and money rather than creating and building something new. Some historical examples came for people more skilled in business or entrepreneurship than geniuses who wanted to solve problems.

Necessity. – Has it ever happened to your mind the idea of having something that could make your life easier in some aspect, but that does not even exist? Well, this is a necessity calling you to create something new out of nothing or out of something that already exists and is given other use. Sometimes innovator feels like if only they could have such a thing could do other activities, simplify the process, improve time and energy, or be lazier, well, there it is.

Combination. The origin of a new concept, idea, product, service, process, technology, and so is a variety of described previous factors. The innovation process can start at any point and suffer for swifts and switches that life imposes on us. In the meantime, while trying to focus, life happens and forces you to see in an opposite direction, change motivation, look for other opportunities, or get back to starting point and bingo! What was looking for it is found less expectedly.

Innovation brings many benefits to organizations, such as deeper capabilities to define and achieve strategic objectives, business model introduction, becoming more proactive rather than reactive. Eliminate much firefighting, causing other firms to react to your innovations with a new product, service, and employees who are more engaged and use

a broader set of tools and techniques to accomplish strategic goals. Increase revenues and profits while retaining efficient cost management; sustained market differentiation and favorable media and press coverage; increased ability to leverage internal knowledge and external partnerships, says expert Phillips. Innovation becomes in many companies as a way of sustainability or growth; either organization innovates or dies competing with others. However, the invention must be in balance as part of an organizational strategy; not everything is innovating; not everything is the search for profits.

What is required from leaders and project managers to innovate?

Leaders are essential because they give others orientation, guidance, and example; they set what is needed and valued inside an organization. The same happens within the scope of a project; the project manager gives the vision and direction of the project; however, there is no condition to innovate to be a leader or the other way around. Since leaders in organizations are responsible for their well-being, setting a strategy, and succeeding, the following aspects are based on thinking on them but are also applicable to anyone.

Hard work. – As cruel as it sounds, nothing (or almost nothing) happens by accident or merely luck. After many years of intense hard work, leaders, project managers, innovators, and creative people come with their innovation, new ideas, new products, new hypotheses, new laws, etcetera. How often is it being said that leaders read, and they read too much; everyone who wants to succeed must be well prepared. Know the world around them, the market, the competition, what is expected from them, and overall hard work. Yes, working hard does not mean only being seated in an office for several hours answering emails. Working hard in the innovation environment means having enough resilience to overcome setbacks, be frustrated, follow dreams, and get nothing. It is the willingness to raise after falling and continue with the same tenacity over what you truly believe.

The idea that everybody thinks is right or could be true about how Newton discovered gravity or how amazon, google, or Netflix works fulfills the tip of the iceberg type of story. They are involved almost in a fairytale; the apple falls from the tree, and gravity is there. However, all great things humans now take for granted, or general knowledge, came from years of study and hard work for somebody long before.

Risks. – Risk is inherent to both leadership and innovation. Not everybody is willing to lose all they know to embark on an adventure of creating something new or following something that is not tested, validated, used, or generally accepted by society. Examples of new technology and inventions are in histories such as the invention of the telephone and television, where at the beginning nobody wanted to invest. It takes risk and courage to believe in others' ideas and be willing to navigate the unknown. Of course, history is also full of failure stories because there are many useless inventions and trying and error attempts that nobody cares about. In other words, being creative is risky; if you are not that type of person or leader, do not even try it.

Sacrifice. – Another relevant aspect of being considered. For example, in the case of Steve Jobs, when his life was ending, he realized that despite the fame, hard work, followers, and his legacy. He sacrificed a lot of his personal experience to benefit what we all know as the apple history. Sacrifice is a concept hard to live and explain; many inventors have lost their marriage, family, wealth, and even health to pursue their dream. Is it worth it? I cannot tell; it depends on internal being, inner values, what moves you, and even what you think your mission in this world is. This paper is not related to ethics or morality; everyone should evaluate what is willing to do either for the right or the wrong causes. However, the main idea here is despite hard work and risk; there is another aspect called a sacrifice to consider if you want to embark on an innovation and creativity adventure. Who knows, maybe sacrifice will take you and humanity to the next big wave of transformation.

Observe and observe. – Innovators, by definition, possess a curious mind; they spend countless hours observing their surroundings, nature, the human body, human behavior, experiment with themselves, with their family and friends, and they become genuinely sees. This quality is becoming weird; with that much technology and ways to facilitate life with applications that tell us almost everything, the ability to watch and observe is nearly gone. However, keeping people has an advantage that is not for everybody; this enormous well-oriented capacity can open full possibilities.

Being trained to see from another perspective. – “Michalko mentions that by changing your perspective, you expand your possibilities until you see something that you were unable to see before.” That is the magic of training your brain to see things from another perspective. Creative and innovative people do not follow the current path; they can see what others cannot. This situation also happens after hard work and training, yes training in several tools and mechanisms to put the attention in the missing spot, in the path that does not follow, in the alternatives everybody ignored, and so on. Being creative also requires many hours of unlearning what we already know and searching for other ways to understand reality.

Innovation will require leadership. That is a fact; however, not everything relies on the characteristics of the organization's leader. "Innovation requires thought leaders, transformers, game-changers, ideators, disruptors, challengers, and observers. It also requires a platform where people can exchange ideas about trends occurring on a global level and what is happening in our arena, mentions Gerakiteys". An ethical culture that supports innovation as a processor integrates as part of the business, as usual, will be needed to help the individual, visionary leadership to go to the next level.

Suggested steps for Leaders and PM to innovate

Davila's innovation rules suggested that any CEO, leader, or top management organization can benefit from implementing an innovation program.

1. **Exert strong leadership** on the innovation strategy and portfolio decisions. Like any other strategy in organizations, one has to consider and support the head.

Clear direction, support, motivation, and reward will assure and encourage to permeate innovation culture inside the organization.

2. **Integrate innovation** into the company's first business mentality. Innovation mentality has to be promoted to daily activities, rewarding business as usual performance and improvement in operational activities that include or represent an innovative way of thinking.
3. **Align the amount and type of innovation** to the company's business. The type and the amount of invention needed for the organization, balancing between those, are activities relying on the organization's head for a successful strategy.
4. **Manage the natural tension** between creativity and value capture. Balancing again between these two is a responsibility for the CEO, creating enough value so the entity can survive and grow with the right amount of creativity.
5. **Neutralize organizational antibodies.** Natural change enemies can appear now and then when innovation comes to the scene; it is also the work of the head of the organization to minimize risks and incorporate and invite to participate in all the initiatives.
6. **Recognize that the basic innovation unit is a network** that includes people and knowledge both inside and outside the organization. Bringing the right people from outside and mixed with internal resources will help the organization's success in the innovation initiatives.
7. **Create the right metrics and rewards for innovation.** Proper metrics and rewards are also needed as innovation occurs; people will help to support if the right metrics are set up.

At the end

Innovation and creativities are processes that can be learned or developed with patience and a willingness to learn. Both are needed for the world to progress. Both are necessary for businesses and organizations to compete and remain competitive, being in the state of the art if they want to be part of a market.

Innovation represents a big part of human life and also for the organization. However, it is equally relevant to balance other business and project objectives; otherwise, a business can suffer either because of too much innovation with no profitability or too much income or revenue without sustainability. This is also applicable to any project; too much innovation can deviate from the core of the project or affect the profitability of the project.

Innovation and creativity can be performed on several levels inside the organization, can be a policy and mandatory, or can be the goal of a single person that could represent a significant change. It depends on the individuals, the leadership, and the organization.

Innovation is not for everybody; no matter how fascinated stories are and how much one can become the next hero, it always represents a risk and not a visible amount of work and dedicated hours that not all are willing to pay. Other important aspects to consider are equally significant such as risk and sacrifice if someone wants to succeed.

It is vital to understand that the roots of innovation are everywhere; there are many venues to become innovative, as many as motives and reasons humans find in their internal will to move into this marvelous world. Inspiration has come to writers, artists, musicians, scientists, businesspeople, technological people from several sources and several reasons. People do unbelievable things for love, recognition, power, pain, and pride; you never know if your next problem will put you in the path of a great discovery. Being attentive, observing, being open-minded, and being willing to see things from other perspectives seem crucial for innovation.

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Angelica Larios, DSL, MBA, PMP, is a project manager with more than 20 years of experience in implementing software projects related to business intelligence, planning and budgeting, and financial consolidation solutions based on software applications to support the business decision process. She is the owner of ALACONTEC, an I.T. consulting company founded in Latin America. She has held several professional positions in private and public organizations, such as the Health Ministry in Mexico as an I.T. director and a business manager for several Mexican firms.

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