The background of the page is a stylized illustration of a city at night. Tall buildings with many windows are visible, some of which are lit up with a blue glow. In the foreground, a series of grey steps or platforms lead upwards from the bottom left towards the top right. Five business professionals are shown climbing these steps. From bottom left to top right, there is a man in a dark suit, a woman in a white sleeveless top and brown pants, a man in a grey suit, a woman in a dark dress, and a man in a brown suit. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greys, with some white and brown accents from the people and text.

Creating an **INNOVATION** **FITNESS PLAN**

BY ELENA IMARETSKA AND JOHN SWEENEY

Employees often lack the creative confidence to be innovative. Given time and opportunity to practice five behaviors, that can change.



Driving innovation in a large company is hard. There is an inherent difference, and sometimes a conflict, between the mindset and culture an efficient organization needs to focus on its core business and the mindset and culture necessary for an organization to produce ongoing innovation.

Innovation is key to sustain success in an uncertain world, and most companies include innovation in their mission statements and long-term strategies, and fund efforts to embed innovation into their cultures. Many of these efforts are sound and include impressive initiatives with systems for sourcing and evaluating ideas, innovation councils and champions, selection criteria, funding committees, awards and robust communication strategies.

ON THE WEB

To build innovation capabilities, address the challenge on three levels: build individual skills, help teams innovate new products or processes, and build systemic capabilities for the whole company: CLOmedia.com/innovate.

But aside from a handful of widely cited and admired innovative companies, many large organizations are still struggling. One problem is the processes typically deployed to drive enterprisewide innovation omit one important component: the innovation fitness level for the human beings who power these same processes.

To successfully drive behavior adoption, allow teams to personalize behaviors and how they practice them.

Employees often lack the creative confidence to participate, perceive innovation as an additional task on top of their jobs, or are unclear how it is relevant to them personally. The efforts often resemble an attempt to build successful marathon runners by providing them with great gear, pacers, running courses, incentives and techniques for running a marathon, but ignoring that it's the first time the group is running, and they lack the basic fitness level to keep up.

It is nearly impossible to push someone from zero to innovative without first building up his or her innovation fitness. While we are all born creatively perfect and equal, experiences often shape our brains to favor the quick, direct connections needed for intelligence and overlook the meandering, associative networks that innovation requires. Further, innovation needs more than thinking; it requires people to act in a different way.

Increase Innovation Fitness

Entrepreneurs are perhaps the best real-world models to embody business innovation. A 2014 study by Kathryn Shaw of Stanford University and Francine Lafontaine of the University of Michigan shows that practice matters. Their study of 2.5 million small businesses over 10 years showed that entrepreneurs' learning and experience increased their probability of success. Entrepreneurship, aka innovation in action, can be learned, and practicing is the key to increasing one's innovation capacity.

"Building a practicing organization takes intention," said Bryant Pfeiffer, vice president of club services for Major League Soccer. "Competing pressures make it easy to postpone the time to practice, that's why most people never get to it. The key is to find an

internal stakeholder who can be an advocate for the program. Then build out a set schedule for reinforcement and practice; make it easy and fun for people, and you will be amazed with the results."

Another key to successfully drive behavior adoption is to allow teams to personalize behaviors and how they practice them. Troy Hayes, director of talent leadership and organization development at global diversified industrial company Ingersoll Rand, said innovation is one of the organization's values.

But with 11 business units and 40,000 employees around the world, Hayes' team has to relinquish control and allow the business units to define what that means to them within certain guidelines. "We have created a movement instead of a prescriptive set of steps to follow," he said. "To turn our values into more than words and create a culture that is open and progressive, we urge teams to focus not only on what they do but how they do it."

David Cambronne, manager and vice president enterprise talent planning and development services at Wells Fargo, is on the same page. He said it's important to invest in individual employee development. Meaningful development occurs when employees consider where they excel, what they care about, what the current business environment needs and how their contributions align with the organization's values.

"We have a strong belief that each individual has to own their development, and that it is the responsibility of our managers to create space for learning to happen," Cambronne said. "We provide a lot of tools for employees to identify where they want to focus and encourage meaningful and frequent conversations about development."

Practice Makes Innovation

Five basic behaviors are a low-risk point of entry for activities to build innovation fitness within a workforce.

Listening: Listening intently and being aware of all the verbal and nonverbal cues in communication can be hard. There is a strong psychological phenomenon called "confirmation bias" — human beings tend to search for, focus and see information that confirms beliefs or opinions they already hold. Noticing details and listening openly can increase employees' innovation fitness because innovation is rooted in discovering needs and insights from the environment.

"We are approaching our customer conversations in a different way," Hayes said. "We are not only asking them what they want, but listening for what they need, even if they don't know it yet."

Ingersoll Rand has built numerous courses and

tools to help its employees understand customers better. The company is modeling the behavior throughout the whole organization . For example, recruiting partners join the sales team on client visits to learn more about what the customer values. One customer was so impressed, they made Ingersoll Rand a preferred provider.

Deferring judgment: Innovation works best when diverse points of view have a chance to mingle and co-create. In a 2013 study “Innovation, Diversity and Market Growth,” a team of researchers showed that organizations with diverse employees and leaders with inclusive behaviors are 70 percent more likely to capture a new market and 45 percent more likely to expand an existing one. Deferring judgment is a key behavior when it comes to making diversity and inclusion work.

“There is no question diversity and inclusion drive innovation,” Cambronne said. “When we know each other, we are more likely to collaborate and support each other in new ways of thinking and operating; all of which are critical components of innovation.”

Wells Fargo invites employees from all levels to tell

their stories. Cambronne said role-modeling and reinforcing the importance of telling diversity stories is part of the company’s standard operating procedure.

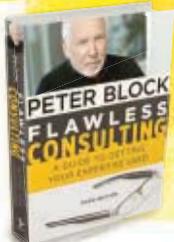
Declaring: Because diversity helps innovation, allowing people to communicate authentically and effectively is key to success. Authentic self-expression also can help employee retention, increase engagement and work satisfaction. “At Ingersoll Rand, there is a lot of overlap between efforts around engagement and innovation,” Hayes said. “If people are engaged, they will speak up more. We need everyone, especially the frontline employees to step up and have their voices heard.”

To ensure hourly frontline employees and their managers are well-equipped to declare their point of view, the company is piloting a new problem-solving training to help these groups think about and articulate ways to solve issues Ingersoll Rand is also evaluating plant manager training to supplement those efforts so there is cohesion in the approach throughout the plant.

INNOVATION continued on page 47



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Reframing: Functional fixedness is another psychological bias that tends to limit how someone views use of an object for its traditional purpose. Because innovation is an iterative process, which often borrows concepts from other fields, the ability to reframe information in a productive manner is key to increase innovation fitness.

Pfeiffer runs an award-winning sales representative training program that also acts as an innovation lab for the sales culture at Major League Soccer. “When it comes to behaviors, we try to help our trainees become comfortable being uncomfortable,” he said.

To help trainees reframe discomfort and become more confident, nimble and innovative when serving customers, Pfeiffer borrows practices from fields outside of sales. “We have built very effective partnerships with improvisation experts and yoga practitioners who work with our trainees to expand their comfort zones.”

Jumping in: Psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer has dedicated his career to studying decision-making. His 2014 research — “Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education, and Professions: A Meta-Analysis” — shows that 50 percent of all decisions in a business are gut decisions, though publicly they are never named as such. He said the tendency to make decisions solely based on statistics and algorithms is sound when things are stable.

But in the highly unpredictable world we live in, intuition and smart heuristics are valuable tools to respond to quick changes and uncertainty. Managers already rely on their intuition but waste significant organizational time to defend those decisions with data in case they turn out to be wrong. The ability to take action or “jump in” is a key behavior for innovation, where uncertainty is a given.

To build a mindset and culture of innovation, increasing employees’ innovation fitness is necessary. As learning leaders help employees build out their practice, they too can embrace the five basic behaviors.

Leaders should listen to learners and their organizations evolving, personal needs; defer judgment on non-traditional ways to drive practice; declare the importance of practice to win leadership support; reframe the challenge associated with large geographically diverse workforces into opportunities to promote customization; and most importantly, jump in and begin piloting programs in the right places with the right people sooner rather than later. [CLO](#)

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And good news for CLOs: This type of engagement is quantifiable. Rouse said AT&T gets data from its MOOC provider on who participates and completes certifications. Certifications are broken down into a number of MOOC courses, typically two to six, and after completing the series, employees get a certification from the partner and from AT&T.

The company provides badges that are posted to its social networking profile and learning portal. Rouse said obtaining an industry-recognized certification from a MOOC company isn’t the only draw; if in-house badges take too long to appear, her phone will be ringing off the hook with impatient employees’ calls.

Certificates and badges arguably provide a better way to measure progress outside of completion and, although it’s not a formal academic accreditation, they can be great for CLOs trying to measure learning impact.

“CLOs have something tangible they can share and build a set of statistics around for the rest of the company,” Sebastien said. “They can put pressure on those who haven’t completed the training by saying, ‘Look, some of you have achieved the certificate level successfully, and that leaves four of you to go.’ Or when justifying to the CFO how well these programs are going, they can say, ‘Hey, we’ve had a 94 percent completion rate’ or ‘94 percent of our viewers have received a certificate.’”

Certificates and badges also bring certain social rewards and pressures, an engagement factor Sebastien said many companies currently overlook but that he’s seen in practice. “In our courses, you’ll see a lot of active discussion from course viewers around the topics. You’ll even see some interesting topics around debates when someone has viewed a course, and that’s the thing where people who are really getting something out of the MOOCs and becoming thought leaders can kind of show their stuff,” he said. “That breeds more and more incentive to kind of level up, if you will.”

Rouse said the future of MOOCs as a widely used and CFO-approved learning tool to fill in skill gaps is promising. But with companies investing a lot of resources and time into employee development, low engagement rates just aren’t acceptable.

“The low completion rates when they first came out were due to people like me who just wanted to check them out,” she said. “Yes, only 5 to 10 percent may be completing these courses, but unlike a class for a company, who was serious about finishing in the first place?” [CLO](#)

Lara Walsh is a former Chief Learning Officer editorial intern. To comment, email editor@CLOmedia.com.