

ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR CREATING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

Bryan W. Mattimore

Not long after 9/11, the Con Edison company contacted me about delivering a keynote speech on creativity and innovation for their NYC-based middle managers and senior executives. You may know that during 9/11, Con Ed employees went to heroic lengths to restore power in record time to businesses and residents of lower Manhattan.

I think the Con Ed executives were seeing my talk, which was part of a day-long training and employee enrichment program, as a kind of reward for all the hard work their employees had done after the attack on the Twin Towers, as well as a way to send the message that innovation was – and would continue to be – an important organizational value.

I was both deeply honored and slightly embarrassed by their invitation. They had been on the front lines fighting terrorism, and I had been sitting at home in Connecticut watching TV and drinking diet soda. To earn the right to address them, I felt I needed a way – even if it was relatively insignificant – to empathize with what they had been through.

And so, I asked a member of the Con Edison leadership team if I could spend a day in the field with their employees: service technicians, powerplant managers, emergency response teams, etc. To my surprise, they agreed, and gave me virtually unlimited access.

On the appointed day, after signing the necessary waivers, I donned a Con Edison hard hat and was off. I rode the trucks, toured the power plants, even crawled through the maze of steam heating pipes in Rockefeller Center looking for leaks. It was an extraordinary experience at so many levels, including being a lot of fun. What I hadn't anticipated was that it would change forever how I viewed my work as an innovation consultant.

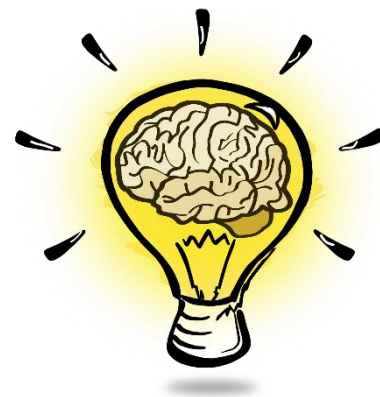
For each of the more than a dozen Con Ed employees I “worked with” that day, I asked two simple questions:

1. “What’s something you would change at work?” ... thank you, Peter Drucker, for this question, and
2. “In all your years working at Con Ed, what are you most proud of?”

Question number one gave me great insight into what was and wasn't working “on the front lines” that I was able to incorporate into my keynote. But it was question number two that provided me with my Eureka, life changing moment.

Every employee I asked the “most proud of” question, without exception, said that it was an idea they came up with, and that the company subsequently implemented, they were most proud of. And these were not necessarily big ideas. It could have been a simple cost-cutting recommendation, a suggestion to make service calls more efficient, or a novel approach to managing the power grid to better accommodate energy spikes on hot summer days.

Mo, a 25-year Con Ed veteran, and my companion inspecting the Rockefeller Center steam pipe leaks, told me that it was his idea to have the company tie in the worker's cell phones with customer service,



so they could be connected at all times with customer requests, no matter where they were on the job site.

It became obvious to me that day that everyone in an organization not only has the potential, but as importantly, the need to contribute new ideas to help their company grow and prosper.

In the years since that day, my belief in creating an environment where all employees are encouraged to make meaningful creative contributions to their organization has only strengthened. Being able to contribute new ideas is critical to an employee's sense of self... and ultimately self-worth. It is both wasteful – and frankly unkind – to allow an employee's creative potential to go unrealized.

From an organizational perspective, it may well be that the most under-leveraged organizational asset is the creativity of its employees. How then can organizational leaders create organizational structures that foster and exploit this unrealized creative potential so important to not only the organization – but to the employees as well?

I can't think of a single Fortune 500 company that my innovation agency has worked with in the past three years, where their leadership didn't recognize that in these times of accelerated change, unanticipated disruptions (including of course the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020), and increasingly-fierce domestic and global competition, that “innovating the future” wasn't critical. They recognize that creating innovation structures that ensure continuous innovation, accomplished with great speed and agility, is now a prerequisite to their organization's very survival.

And so, to their credit, these companies have pioneered new models for innovation. Importantly, these new models go way beyond the closer-in, “business-as-usual” creation of line extensions and product service tweaks. No, specially designated innovation teams are now:

- pioneering white space opportunities, often between divisions, which are innovating entirely new product or service platforms.
- developing open innovation programs to incubate and/or joint venture with start-ups.
- establishing their own venture funds to promote and profit by investing in new ventures in associated industries.
- partnering with other companies to invent and offer products and services they would or could not offer on their own, and certainly not with the same speed that the partnership allows.
- teaming with a wide variety of trend agencies, technology research services, and consumer research firms to inform the invention – or acquisition – of synergistic, and on-trend new business opportunities.

These new innovation models are revolutionizing how innovation is done today.

Unfortunately, these innovation models do not involve the entire organization. The majority of the organization's employees typically don't work in strategy, marketing, or product development... and therefore don't have the opportunity to make nearly as many, if any, new idea contributions to the organization. One can only imagine the loss in creative productivity, not to mention employee satisfaction, by not having a process and a culture that encourages creative contributions from everyone.

That's not to say that companies haven't tried, and aren't continuing to try, to encourage idea submissions from all employees in traditionally less-than “idea-driven” departments. Suggestion box programs are the best known of these initiatives. However, with a few exceptions (Toyota, Dart Industries, Frito-Lay, etc.) suggestion box programs have been dismal failures. A lack of follow-up and development of submitted ideas, along with ill-conceived reward programs, have been the two main reasons for their failure.

Electronic “suggestion box” platforms from Spigit, Brightidea, Ezassi, Planbox, and others have fared better, but can also suffer from a lack of internal support and effective follow-through, much like traditional suggestion box programs. “Hackathons” and Shark Tank-type competitions have on occasion succeeded, but these are usually one-time events, and don’t necessarily promote a culture change that continuously encourages the sharing of new ideas from all employees.

What about leading more and different kinds of ideation sessions with employees from across the organization? Traditionally, ideation sessions are used to generate:

- new growth strategies.
- new product and service ideas.
- product positioning and development concepts.
- new sales strategies.
- advertising, promotion, and social media ideas.

... and as such, rarely involve employees outside these specialized areas of expertise.

Fortunately, this narrow focus on running only new products, marketing, strategy, or advertising ideation sessions is also changing. My innovation agency, for instance, has been tasked with designing and facilitating a wide range of non-traditional ideation sessions – both as stand-alone projects, but also as part of larger, organizational-wide Total Innovation Enterprise consulting initiatives. These sessions include creating innovative ideas, processes, and programs to:

- improve customer experience and loyalty.
- reinvent logistics and supply chain methodologies.
- recruit and retain talent.
- develop innovative sales strategies.
- communicate more effectively both internally and externally.
- reduce costs organization-wide.
- develop cross-divisional process initiatives to improve efficiency while also reducing time to market.
- more effectively integrate a new acquisition.
- improve the effectiveness of training programs.
- identify and promote potential strategic contributions from finance and accounting.
- increase manufacturing output and plant safety.
- improve sustainability.

And this is a promising trend. But even though these creative applications of ideation processes frequently lead to successful outcomes, they are still one-shots. They generate solutions for the specific identified challenges, but fall short of true culture change, again in part, because they involve only a small percentage of the entire organization’s workforce, and they are not practiced continuously.

So, what’s the answer? What will help create a culture of creativity and innovation where all employees feel empowered to continuously generate new ideas to benefit the organization... and in the process meet their own, inherent need for personal growth and self-actualization? One answer we’ve discovered is to re-focus the organization on their vision, mission, and values, but particularly their values.

A vision, most readers will know, is the “reason for being” of an organization. In succinct and simple language, it makes clear how the organization aspires to serve its constituents while making the world a better place. Disney’s, “To Make People Happy,” or Charles Schwab’s, “Helping Investors Help Themselves,” are two good examples.

If the vision represents the “why” of an organization, the mission makes clear the “how” – specifically, how the organization is going to achieve the vision. Typically, a mission includes a 3 - 5-year future view of the organization. Here’s Toyota’s mission:

Toyota will lead the way to the future of mobility, enriching lives around the world with the safest and most responsible ways of moving people. Through our commitment to quality, constant innovation, and respect for the planet, we aim to exceed expectations and be rewarded with a smile. We will meet challenging goals by engaging the talent and passion of people who believe there is always a better way.

Creating, and communicating the vision and mission, is the job of senior leadership.



Values, on the other hand, are and should be more democratic: they are what support and inform the vision and mission and shape the culture. And because they represent what the organization “values” – its essential principles and beliefs – they also guide and model the behavior of every employee at every level of the organization. Two of the most important “values” of values are the following. First, they help employees in the decision-making process, both in determining what to do, and equally as important, what NOT to do. Second, if supported

and continually re-affirmed by the organization’s leadership, they can also inspire and encourage daily creative contributions.

Zappos, the legendary online shoe and fashion retailer, was at one point facing bankruptcy. According to CEO Tony Hsieh, it wasn’t until they crystallized their own vision, mission, and values – but especially their values – that the company turned around and ultimately sold to Amazon in November 2009 for \$1.2 billion. Interestingly, creating and then settling on their ten values was a year-long process that involved everyone in the organization. Zappos’s ten values are:

1. Deliver WOW through service.
2. Embrace and drive change.
3. Be adventurous, creative, and open-minded.
4. Pursue growth and learning.
5. Build open and honest relationships with communication.
6. Build a positive team and family spirit.
7. Do more with less.
8. Be passionate and determined.
9. Be humble. And...
10. Create fun and a little weirdness.

I have yet to find a medium or large size organization without at least one value that doesn’t champion the importance of creative thinking, innovation, or growth. In Zappos’ case, at least three of their values implicitly or explicitly focus on the importance of being creative: numbers 2, 3, and 10.

Since values that stress creative organization-wide contributions are already being championed by senior leadership, they create an opportunity – and tacit approval – for internal change agents to create more and better organizational initiatives, programs, and processes that encourage “everyday” employee creativity.

Pragmatically speaking, what might some of these programs and processes be? How can values, specifically, be used to encourage ongoing creative contributions from all employees? A critical first step of course is to determine where the organization is in relation to its own values creation and acceptance.

If the organization’s values have not yet been created, or as importantly, not continually championed in an inspirational and actionable way, then it may be time to either: a) create new values, or b) re-energize the current ones.

When my innovation agency leads vision, mission, and values creation projects for a client, it’s a given that vision and mission are the purview of the organization’s leadership. But in creating the organization’s values, we involve every employee in the process. Here’s how:

1. All employees are asked to submit their ideas for the values.
2. A values committee made up of organization representatives from all levels and all departments’ reviews and themes the often literally thousands of “values” submissions.
3. This committee then decides on both the themes, and the specific language they would like to recommend to the organization’s leadership committee and/or Board.
4. The values are agreed upon by both the values committee and the organization’s leadership. The number of values typically ranges from 5 to 10.
5. The final values are then shared with the entire organization.

This is only the first of many steps, however, to use the values as a vehicle for encouraging the suggestion, development, and launch of new ideas.

After the values have been agreed upon and announced, we lead (or train internal facilitators to lead), 3-hour “values implementation” workshops with all employees. In these workshops, each employee learns and applies a variety of ideation techniques that help them to reimagine their day-to-day jobs in ways that are informed and inspired by the organization’s stated values. These imaginative, job reinvention techniques include *customer wishing*, *job mind-mapping*, and *a-day-in-the-life*.

These values implementation workshops are a critical step to creating an organization-wide culture of innovation for several reasons:

1. They clearly send the message that having organizational values is NOT so that a pretty plaque can be hung on the wall with some inspirational words on it; rather, they are intended to inspire and direct every aspect of an employee’s work.
2. They expose all employees to a variety of personal team ideation techniques they can use in all aspects of their jobs to generate new ideas.
3. Since one of the values is invariably about being creative, they send the message that being creative in their day-to-day jobs is critically important.
4. They set the stage for ongoing, organization-wide values popularization and activation programs.

What are some examples of these popularization and activation programs, especially as they might relate to using values to inspire a “culture of innovation?” Here are two.

One of our clients creates “values newsletters” for all their employees that highlight a different organizational value each month. So, for instance, one of their seven organizational values is, “Be a Pioneer.”

The values newsletter featuring the “Be a Pioneer” value encourages employees to exhibit behaviors that reflect such words as “introduce, launch, initiate, spearhead, found, originate, create, blaze a trail, and make the first move.” The newsletter also features reviews of books and TED talks that contain principles and case studies of “pioneering behavior.” And finally, organization leaders are encouraged to begin all their team meetings with a short discussion of what it means to “Be a Pioneer.” The continuing focus on values – month in and month out – is critical for evolving the organizational culture to a more innovative one.

The second technique we use to help institutionalize the value of creativity we call *The Whiteboard Technique*. It is a very simple technique, and it can be done either virtually or at an organization’s offices. In a physical office setting, the manager places a whiteboard in a public location and records a challenge for which she wants new ideas. Co-workers are then encouraged to add ideas for a pre-determined length of time – usually seven to ten days. As employees add ideas each day, the number of ideas grows dramatically, which can inspire ideas that both build on existing ideas, as well as spark entirely new ones. After the allotted time, the manager who posted the creative challenge selects the most promising ideas for future development and/or implementation. Then another creative challenge is posted. Unlike a suggestion box program, the whiteboard technique can be used to elicit ideas for a wide range of very specific challenges, while at the same time encouraging build-on ideas.



There’s a popular notion in creative problem-solving circles: don’t try to solve a challenge by attacking it head-on... rather approach it by “thinking to the side.” Creating a culture of innovation by using the organization’s values as a vehicle for continually reminding all employees about both the importance of – and the organization’s receptivity to – new ideas, is a wonderful “thinking to the side” strategy. And it’s one that every employee, as they begin to realize their own creative potential, should thank you for.

About the Author



Bryan W. Mattimore specializes in ideation and innovation process, front-end marketing research, branding, creating and developing new products and services, and innovation strategic planning.

He is Cofounder and “Chief Idea Guy” of the Growth Engine Company, a sixteen-year-old innovation agency based in Norwalk, Connecticut. Prior to cofounding Growth Engine, he was president of the Mattimore Group, a twenty-year-old ideation facilitation and creativity consulting company.

In his business consulting career, Mr. Mattimore has facilitated over a thousand brainstorming sessions, moderated over five hundred creative focus groups and consumer ethnographies, and managed over two hundred successful innovation projects, leading to over \$3 billion in new sales annually for a wide variety of Fortune 500 clients.

Companies that Mr. Mattimore has worked with include: Accenture, AstraZeneca, ATT, Black & Decker, BNY Mellon, City of New York, ConEdison, Danaher, Dun & Bradstreet, Eaton, Esselte, Essilor, Ford, Grumman Data Systems, IBM, ITT, Johnson and Johnson, Lexis-Nexis, Lockheed Martin, Lucent, LVMH, Microsoft, Pepsi, Philips, Pitney-Bowes, Procter and Gamble, Sony, State Farm, Time-Warner, United Technologies, and Unilever.

He speaks frequently to organizations and associations on innovation processes best practices. He has addressed or co-chaired conferences for the Industrial Research Institute (IRI), Product Development Managers Association (PDMA), American Marketing Association (AMA), American Society of Training and Development (ASTD), Vistage, Young President’s Association (YPA), and the World Innovation Forum.

Mr. Mattimore has authored dozens of published articles and webinars, and three books on business creativity and innovation process: [21 Days to a Big Idea, Creating Breakthrough Business Concepts](#) (Diversio Books, Fall 2015), [Idea Stormers, How to Lead and Inspire Creative Breakthroughs](#) (Wiley Jossey-Bass, 2012), and [99% Inspiration, A Real World Guide to Business Creativity](#) (Amacom, 1993), selected as the American Management Association’s membership offering/book of the year.) A cum laude graduate of Dartmouth College, with a major in psychology, he is also the inventor of the creativity training game, Bright Ideas.

Contact Information

Bryan Mattimore
Cofounder & Chief Idea Guy
The Growth Engine Company
One Selleck Street, Norwalk, CT 06855
(203) 550-4487
info@growth-engine.com
www.growth-engine.com