

In the world of education, as well as in many other industries, the word “innovation” is often used synonymously with the terms “modern,” “new,” and “forward-thinking” and serves as a catalyst to spark creativity for greater results and organizational efficiency. It is a word that conjures images of cutting-edge technology, transformed learning and workspaces, and altered production systems. Today, every industry, including education, is in an era where innovations related to Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) are beginning to impact the way we work and will fundamentally change the workforce going forward.

At a time when school systems and corporations are faced with post-pandemic malaise and trying to find new ways to recoup, recover, renew, and reinvent, innovation is a leadership necessity for forward momentum and progress. Many times, however, while the workforce we serve might agree that innovation is a necessary element for improvement, staff members may not necessarily share the same enthusiasm as the principals, superintendents, or corporate executives who are championing the innovation. In fact, many times when a new or groundbreaking innovative idea is presented, the innovation is met with a bit of eye-rolling. This skepticism usually arises because staff members have observed the poor execution of previous innovations, so they are curious about how this “new nonsense” will impact their work, once again. They may also be skeptical because implementing a novel idea means establishing new routines, learning new procedures, monitoring new data sets, and...change. And let’s face it, most people resist change because change is uncomfortable.

So, what is the true C.O.S.T. of innovation? While funding is a critical aspect that must be considered prior to launching the new idea, system, or process, the “cost” is not just about dollars and cents; it is also about creating an innovative organizational culture. To do so, there are four essential elements that should be considered to ensure success and sustainability. Those four components are related to having the:

- **C**ourage to listen and embrace change.
- **O**rganizational discipline to navigate the journey.
- **S**tructure to support the innovation.
- **T**enacity to see it through to the end by striving for excellence.

Let us dig deeper into the true C.O.S.T. of innovation.

## **Courage: Embracing Change While Honoring Your North Star**

Innovation often springs from discomfort, frustration, or a longing for something better. It takes courage to listen to the concerns and ideas of others to find common ground—our common pain points—that unite us along the journey of progress. To that end, innovation should not be a solitary adventure; instead, it should involve all stakeholders. We must have the courage to recognize what brings us together, to understand the shared challenges, and to move forward cohesively.

Having the courage to listen, however, can also become a challenge because leaders are often confronted with varied viewpoints and are expected to agree with and act on each one. Therefore, it is imperative for us, as leaders, to be secure in what we know to be right and true and to be aware of our North Star. For me, this is where the 80/20 Rule comes into play. Many of us associate the 80/20 Rule with the Pareto Principle, where 80% of the output is the result of 20% of the input. For example, 80% of a community project is completed by 20% of volunteers. However, I would like to offer another perspective on the 80/20 Rule.

Instead of thinking about the 80/20 Rule solely in terms of inputs and outputs, I challenge you to think about it as a line of demarcation to determine what you, as a leader, value most. In our journey as leaders, 80% of what people ask about or want to do might have minimal impact on our overall mission. These are areas where we can be flexible. The crucial part is identifying our 20%—our North Star. As leaders, we must ask ourselves, “What is my North Star? What do I stand on and for?” For me, it is equity in education and in educational opportunities for students. My North Star is also related to high-quality content, authentic literacy, and highly effective daily instruction – these are my non-negotiables. I challenge you, as leaders, to ask yourselves, “What are my non-negotiables? What is my North Star?” and “How does this new idea, process, or innovation align with my North Star?”

Innovation is more than just gadgets and software; it is about people and including the people we serve in our thought processes to create worthwhile innovations that will make a real difference in the work we do every day. So, once we have identified our 20%, it is equally essential to discover what is in their 20%—our employees, our stakeholders, and everyone we serve. This is where the real momentum begins. We find a starting point by having the courage to listen to our stakeholders, locating common ground and common pain points, and understanding what is in their 20%. That is where we find the connective tissue that will strengthen the innovation and our overall body of work.

### **Organizational Discipline: Navigating the Innovation Journey**

Innovation is not a one-time affair; it is an ongoing commitment to the organization and to those whom we serve by creating an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. Organizational discipline ensures that processes and procedures are in place, that responsibilities are delegated, monitored, and fulfilled, and that we learn from our missteps. Concisely, organizational discipline simply means doing what we said we would do, and when we fall or make a mistake, we own it, recover, and get back on track.

Just like learning to roller skate, innovation often involves falls, bumps, and bruises. But with discipline, we learn, adapt, and keep pushing forward toward our goals. As leaders, we must check in, prioritize, and play an active role in navigating the journey from innovation to institutionalization, where, over time, the innovation becomes part of the fabric of the organization. As leaders, we must be committed to asking ourselves, “What obstacles are getting in the way of having a disciplined organization?”

### **Structure: Building the Foundations of Innovation**

A solid foundation is essential for any innovation to thrive. The organizational structure must align not only with our core mission and purpose but also with our innovative ideas, ensuring that everyone comprehends their role and the importance of their contributions. Think of it like an NFL team—everyone knows their position and how they contribute to the football team's success. A solid structure means that we have the key positions and personnel in place to handle the organizational change and that everyone knows their role and the overall goal. In other words, the organizational structure should serve as the foundation to frame, bolster, and support innovation.

## **Tenacity: The Unwavering Drive for Excellence**

Innovation calls for patience and unwavering tenacity. As leaders, we must be willing to consider all perspectives and persist in the face of challenges and opposition. While opposition is often frustrating, it can serve to make us stronger, better, more resilient, and more focused. Opposition, in fact, helps us refine our ideas and allows us to see around corners, which, in turn, allows innovation to endure.

Many times, innovative ideas that sail through without opposition are those that may leave the organization vulnerable. Iron sharpens iron; therefore, instead of dismissing opposers, the most effective leaders have the courage to bring opposing views into the conversation and remain open to new perspectives that strengthen the organization. The tenacious leader is courageous and disciplined, yet flexible and open-minded.

## **Innovation in Action**

Our world changed in March 2020. Whether your school, company, or organization is experiencing supply chain or staffing challenges, increased competition, learning loss, or a changing political landscape, I would challenge all of us to consider that innovation is more critical today than ever. Therefore, innovation cannot be a buzzword; instead, it must be the driving force behind progress and a testament to the power of collaboration. When we consider the true C.O.S.T. of innovation, we pave the way for lasting change.

As superintendent of Roanoke City Public Schools (RCPS), I am proud that we have come together as a community to make a change for our students, families, and our city. I spoke with Discovery Education about the C.O.S.T. of Innovation during a Courageous Leaders conversation, where I dove deeper into these concepts and provided real-world examples of how our collective innovation is changing the educational landscape for our students in RCPS. I am proud of the momentum we have established in our school system by embracing collaborative innovation, starting with listening to our stakeholders and addressing our collective 20%.

We are not just working together; we are working as one educational community, united in our dedication to providing equitable educational opportunities for all students. The momentum we have generated is not just about progress for the sake of progress; it is about progress with a purpose – a purpose rooted in the heart and soul of our community. This is our legacy work, which will benefit our students and our community for generations to come.

**So, what comes to your mind when you hear the word innovation? Is it a path to progress? Is it a chance to make a difference? Is it an opportunity to change lives? Is it enhancing our service to others? Let us be committed to starting these critical discussions today.**



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