

# Don't Get Ready, Get Started

Your Innovation Fitness Plan | BY PATRICK IBARRA

**Where are you and your organization** in today's innovation race? The past practice of gathering employees together and assuming that innovative ideas would simply surface is no longer sufficient. Fluctuating budgets, fewer staff, and increased accountability are just a few of the factors igniting a renewed emphasis on doing things differently and doing different things.

There are fewer and fewer good jobs where you can get paid merely for showing up. Instead, successful organizations are paying for people who make a difference. Consider whether your organization would be more successful if your employees were more obedient? Or think for a second: would you be more successful if you had employees who were more artistic, motivated, connected, aware, passionate, and genuine? You can't have both. Organizing around average means that the organization has exchanged the high productivity of exceptional performance for the ease and security of an endless parade of average performers.

There will always be people who crave certainty and detailed marching orders. But leaders must train themselves and their employees to remember that too much direction actually limits individual innovation and speed. We're living in a creative economy and you need more than diligence and expertise from your employees.

Knowing that innovation is critical isn't enough. "Getting it" is one thing; "getting it done" is quite another. It is clear that in order for an organization to embrace innovation, people have to take risks. This means that they have to be really committed to doing something new, because taking risks means that there may be unpleasant consequences as well as pleasant outcomes. The reward for doing nothing shouldn't outweigh trying something.

Most experts agree that these are the skills needed for sustained high performance in the knowledge economy:

**Adaptability:** The capacity to change in response to ever-shifting conditions in the economy and the marketplace, and to quickly master the new skills that such changes require.

**Innovative thinking and action:** The ability to think creatively and to generate new ideas and solutions

to challenges at work. In particular, to determine what needs to be preserved (the "roots") and what needs to be changed (the "anchors" weighing down progress).

**Personal responsibility for learning:** The willingness of individuals to take responsibility for continually improving their work-related capabilities throughout their careers.

Research has shown that effective leaders value a questioning mind, and practice and instill curiosity in their organizations. What lenses are you and your workforce using to analyze problems? Besides a microscope, try a pair of

binoculars, maybe a telescope, and even a kaleidoscope to expand your imagination.

Using various lenses often allows us to reframe capabilities and problems, especially during times of uncertainty.

Keep in mind that while all teachers aren't leaders, leaders must be teachers. To expand your mind about curiosity, I recommend Francesca Gino's article, "The Business Case for Curiosity."<sup>1</sup>

Your overall goal is to come up with a new way of looking at the problem/situation, something unfamiliar that forces a shift in perspective. Try describing your organization without using five key words—government, citizen, service, community, and budget.

Responding to this question can be useful because it forces you to discard some of your most fundamental existing perceptions about your organization. It also pushes you to consider new ways of looking at aspects of what is currently true for your organization.

Practicing innovation so it generates meaningful results and is not the so-called "flavor of the month" requires much more than simply flipping a switch. It commands leaders to foster the collaborative and creative workplace culture required to unleash the potential of organizational members. This, combined with a group of employees who are driven by the fear of settling for what's achievable and instead focus on what's needed, comprise a formidable tandem that effectively disrupts the status quo thinking of "we've always done it that way." Always remember that innovation, change, and progress are siblings.

Successfully implementing innovation within your organization has very little to do with the size of your agency's budget or size of your workforce. There are always people who want a convenient escape hatch as the backdrop of not pursuing innovation. "Don't have the time, don't have the

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ONE  
PERSON WITH  
PASSION IS  
BETTER THAN  
40 PEOPLE  
MERELY  
INTERESTED.”

—E.M. Forster



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budget, and don't have the people to do it right now" were and continue to be repeated by seasoned leaders. That approach is the equivalent of a person saying that he or she can't improve their fitness because they don't have the time, workout gear, or money to pay for membership dues to the local gym. What? Are you kidding me? That's absolutely unacceptable on both fronts—injecting innovation and improving your health.

Now is the precise time to be bold, utilizing the instability of the situation to help government shift toward a different and more influential role going forward. Innovation is no magic elixir to realize this vision, but it's the primary lubricant.

Here are my suggestions for those who crave innovation with an insatiable appetite. Think of it as your innovation fitness plan to keep your mind moist and receptive for discoveries.

**1. Lace up your sneakers:** Look outside government for ideas. The idea that the public sector has nothing to learn from the private sector, or for that matter, the nonprofit sector, is ridiculous. That's just

not true. Focus on aggregating good ideas regardless of the sector or source.

- 2. Take along a friend:** Invite peers from another government agency to spend time with you in your workplace and vice-versa. Take it out to the field departments, too. You'll be amazed at what you discover about your organization and others that will stretch your mind.
- 3. Have a plan, but seek out organic opportunities:** Preparing a fitness plan that includes the frequency and number of reps is a great starting point, but it's not enough. My experience both working in government for over 15 years and consulting to a number of governments the last 19 years has helped me realize there's a strong tendency by senior managers to control everything as an attempt to achieve desired outcomes. In some instances, this will work just fine, but it can seriously impede innovation inside an organization. Prescribing outcomes through the over-reliance on written rules, regulations, policies, and procedures can inadvertently diminish variance, and with it, opportunities for innovation will decline. Crucial to adopting better ways of doing the

public's business requires more than tolerance, but an advocacy for discretion on how things will be done. It is only through these portals, what I call organic opportunities, that innovation will take root and flourish.

- 4. Work on the abs:** Toning your abs is always a segment of getting in shape. Try an "idea wall" to help people traffic in ideas. Put it up in a virtual or real live break room or some other place where employees gather, a white board with dry erase markers, and write on the white board a question like, "What are we doing that makes us think we're innovative?" or "How can we streamline our processes better?" Encourage employees to respond using the dry erase markers. No need for names unless people want to. Through this planned approach to generate more conversations among employees, serendipity has a much better chance to occur.
- 5. Take a run:** Feel the burn and get the lead out! It's great for your heart, among other benefits. Ask a few coworkers to join you for an afternoon and take a virtual field trip to a local art museum, see a film, or tour a local business. The point is change up the predictability to which people have become accustomed and challenge their perspective. The arts are a wonderful way to accomplish this. While serving in city management, I would invite employees on a field trip to see a film, enjoy lunch, and engage them in a wonderful discussion about how what we saw can help us learn and improve our organization—not literally, per se, but as a result of challenging our assumptions. I learned early in my career that in order to help people think differently about their role and potential contributions around innovation, I had to bring them through a different portal. The arts are wonderful at challenging our assumptions and pushing our creativity to explore the unknown.
- 6. Work your back:** Being an innovator requires a lot of heavy lifting, so getting and keeping your back flexible and strong



**THERE ARE  
NO RULES  
HERE. WE'RE  
TRYING TO  
ACCOMPLISH  
SOMETHING.”**

—Thomas Edison

is essential. Invite guest speakers for your employees to hear about the latest in technology advancements, economic trends, or leadership development. Pool financial resources with neighboring jurisdictions and bring in top-shelf speakers and presenters. Your people are hungry for stimulation, so feed them!

- 7. **Stay hydrated:** Must stay hydrated during all this intense exercise so start a book club or attend a webinar. Please email me at [patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com](mailto:patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com) and I will reply with a list of thought-provoking materials—books, websites, and magazines—that will transfer the heat of your energy into fuel and help you sustain the flame starter status you’ve attained in your workplace. Convene your executive leadership team to

attend a webinar and hold a “lessons learned” afterward.

- 8. **Cool down:** Excellent work out, and now it’s time to cool down. You don’t want to wake up tomorrow and experience muscle soreness. All these

exercises are intended to generate a fountain of ideas and new ways of looking at the same old thing, but this is often the toughest part—implementation. Collaborate with coworkers to convert the abundance of ideas into practical improvements. Start with something, pilot it, but start. Yes, it won’t be perfect, polished, and packaged but that’s because innovation is often iterative; there’s no “just add water” for innovation to occur.

- 9. **Do it again:** One workout doesn’t amount to much in-and-of-itself. You

must repeat the fitness plan so that you continue to tone up your mind and body. Increasing your capacity for innovation demands your attention, effort, and initiative; there are no shortcuts. Some people would rather take a pill to get into shape, but that’s fleeting and rarely sustainable. Pursue the alternative instead by working out and jumping in feet first. You’ll be glad you did.

So, there you have it—a simple, straightforward workout plan to strengthen your innovation muscles. There’s no magic to it; it has nothing to do with the type of workout clothes you wear or how long you’ve been working out—nothing of the sort. Successful innovators are disciplined in their approach, purposeful in their actions, and operate with laser-like focus. Let’s get going as you work toward getting better all the time. **PM**

**ENDNOTE**

<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2018/09/the-business-case-for-curiosity>