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# What are the principles of successful innovation

Written by Chuck Swoboda, Marquette University's Innovator-in-ResidenceAs I've interviewed a number of innovators and entrepreneurs for Innovators on Tap over the last couple of years, it has re-confirmed my belief that innovation is not a process or a recipe, but it is fundamentally about people and their mindset. In the first half of season three, I've had a chance to talk with a wide range of incredible guests, who have proven that there is no one particular way to successfully innovate. And while people have different styles, and describe their strategies and philosophies in different ways, if you listen closely they share similar core beliefs that fuel their thinking. As I looked back through these interviews, I realized there are ten broad themes which can be applied to your own innovation journey. They may look a little different depending on the situation and are often applied in unique ways in different companies, but the core ideas are the same. The key is look below the surface of what they did, and understand why they did it — to understand the mindset driving their approach. My hope is that these 10 principles help guide you throughout your own innovator's journey.

1. Look Forwards, Not BackwardsAn entrepreneur must be willing to pivot when necessary to overcome any obstacle. Just because something was successful in the past, doesn't mean it will be in the future. John Coyle, Olympic Silver Medalist and Design Thinking expert summed it up by saying: "What got you here won't get you there." And as I learned in my own career, the corollary of this principle applies as well: Sometimes things might work now that didn't work in the past, especially as other boundary conditions change along the way.
2. Failure is LearningMost people grow up being taught that finding the correct answer is the definition of success, which creates the belief that failure should be avoided at all costs. Innovators, however, develop a unique relationship to failure, viewing it not as a setback but rather as a necessity for growth. Wafaa Arbash, founder and CEO of WorkAround, describes this principle as: "Failure is learning. Failure is growth. Every time you fail, you learn how to stand up again and continue the race. I believe that if you never fail, you haven't tried hard enough to really innovate."
3. Set Ambitious GoalsYou rarely achieve something significant by accident. You have to be trying to get there in the first place. But most people are focused on protecting against the downside, and setting goals they are confident they will achieve. Innovators focus on maximizing the outcome, even if it means not achieving the ultimate goal. Elmer Moore, Executive Director of Scale Up Milwaukee, described it as: "If you're trying to build a business at 10% a year, you will probably fail and grow 5% a year. If you try and build for 30%, you'll still underachieve — but you'll hit 20%. That ambition is critical." As Vince Lombardi said to his Green Bay Packers football team many years ago, "We're going to strive for perfection, and although we may not achieve it, along the way we'll find excellence."
4. Watch What They Do, Not What They SayWhen it comes to innovation, most companies start by asking their customers what they want. It sounds logical, but it's not. What you really need to do is observe how your customers act, find their pain points, and then test different strategies until you find the best one. Julie Miller, behavior psychologist, said, "We rely way too much on asking people, when instead, we should be watching people and testing things." As a leader, this idea can be applied to your team as well. If you want to know how people are responding to a problem or unconventional idea, watch them. Their body language and actions will tell you far more than their words.
5. Passion Really MattersInnovation is hard and being smart is often not enough. When faced with innumerable obstacles, you need a passion for what you are doing in order to keep going. Sherry Zhang, founder and CEO of GenoPalate, said, "People who come through our door are all smart. What can be missing for certain talent is that passion." As the leader of a company pursuing innovation, it seemed like I was always trying to get others excited about a new idea. I learned that people often cared more about my passion for the idea, than the details of the idea itself.
6. Leverage Those Around YouWhen it comes to great innovators, we often think of individual people: Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs, and Elon Musk come to mind. But if you read their stories, you know that they didn't do it by themselves — far from it. Their success came from their ability to leverage the talented people around them. Victor Szczerba, founder and CEO of YetiData, said, "If you really want to get something done beyond yourself, you have to do it with leverage. Leveraging the amazing skill sets of the people around you is the key." This idea is what often separates the inventors from the innovators.
7. Stop Talking, Start DoingIn my experience, everyone loves the ideation part of innovation. In fact, many people assume that is the most important step. But it's not, because a great innovation is usually the result of a series of experiments, where each step guides and informs the next step. Too many entrepreneurs waste valuable time trying to analyze exactly how something will go instead of finding out for themselves. David Katz, CEO of Plastic Bank, said, "Stop overthinking everything. It is impossible to predict mistakes anyway. You have to be in execution." Another way to think about this idea is to apply the advice that I've used many times with my own team to "stop talking and do something about it."
8. Define Your Own SuccessMost people want to be successful, but never take the time to figure out what that really means. Instead they rely on society and other people's definition of success — which is usually backwards looking and limits what is really possible. Matthew Manos, founder of verynice, said, "Success is up to you to define. Constantly trying to become someone else is the single biggest distraction." Keep in mind that while you need to define success for you, the market will ultimately determine if it's innovative or not.
9. Ownership Drives OutcomesHow often have you been in a meeting to discuss something that didn't go as planned, and the first thing the person in charge does is explain how it's not their fault. Someone else didn't do their job or things happened outside their control. While this mindset might be comforting, it gets in the way to building great products. Leif Abraham, founder and CEO of Public.com, said, "Everything in the organization should have a directly responsible individual. Committees lead to compromise, and compromise leads to shitty products." If you want to drive innovation, people have to own outcomes, even those outside of their direct control. When it's someone's fault, it is much more likely to get fixed, or not get off track in the first place.
10. You Create The FutureInnovation is a powerful force to create the future that we want, and not just replicate the situation we currently have. So when it comes to new technology, like Artificial Intelligence or AI, you have to be careful. If you rely on old data and thinking, you simply replicate the past, instead of shaping a better future. Danny Lange, one of the world's leading AI experts, said, "AI — it can represent the world as we would like to see it, not necessarily the way it is and has been, but the way we want to see it going forward." Keep in mind, that the future doesn't just happen. Somebody has to make it happen, somebody has to lead. And if you're reading this article, you might just be that somebody. This content is part of the Innovation Alley initiative at Marquette University. If you're interested in thinking differently, acting boldly, and delivering real, meaningful change, then check out the website here. Are you serious about driving innovation in your organization? Sustaining innovation and creating an organizational culture of innovation and creativity is a process with many components that interact in a dynamic and energizing way. It's all too easy to let specific issues or tactics dominate your efforts. By learning key principles of innovation, leaders and organizations can stay focused on the essence of innovation. The 5 Principles of Sustaining InnovationAccording to Bob Rosenfeld, the author of Making the Invisible Visible: The Human Principles for Sustaining Innovation, these 5 innovation principles give life to the process: First: Innovation starts when people convert problems to ideas. New ideas are born through questions, problems, and obstacles. In order for the innovation process to flourish, it needs a climate that encourages innovation and inquiry, rather than undermines it. Make sure you have a psychologically safe culture so that people feel free to raise concerns and talk through issues. Second: Innovation also needs a system. All organizations have innovation systems. Some are formal, designed by leadership, and some are informal, taking place outside established channels. Systems for innovation fall into one of 5 categories: originator-assisted; targeted innovation; internal venturing; continuous improvement; or strategic transfer. The third principle: Passion is the fuel, and pain is the hidden ingredient. Passion is what propels ideas. It's what transforms other resources into profits, but it never shows up on a balance sheet. Unfortunately, when pursuing a passion or following a dream, pain is part of the process. Innovation leaders need to take the pain with the passion, and learn to manage both effectively. A fourth principle that underlies the methods for innovation: Co-locating drives more effective exchanges. Co-location refers to physical proximity between people. Though not always possible with virtual and remote teams, it's helpful for building the trust that is essential to the innovation process. It also increases the possibility for greater exchange of information, stimulation of creative thinking in one another, and critique of ideas during their formative stage. In the absence of physical co-location, remote teams should focus on enhancing authentic virtual communications so they work together as effectively as possible. And lastly: Differences should be leveraged. The differences that normally divide people — such as language, culture, and problem-solving styles — can be a boon to innovation. When differences are used constructively, and people collaborate across boundaries, they can be leveraged to enhance and sustain the innovation process. Use these 5 principles in your organization to stay focused and stay ahead! Ready to Take the Next Step? Help your organization drive forward these key principles of innovation with a customized learning journey for your leaders using our research-backed modules. Available leadership topics include Boundary Spanning, Communication, Collaboration & Teamwork, Innovation Leadership, Leading Remote & Virtual Teams, Psychological Safety & Trust, and more.

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