



Open Your Mind to Open Innovation

September 24, 2018

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Innovation is always a hot topic. Over the years, we've seen [innovation offices](#) created and people take on the role of [Chief Innovation Officer](#).

But, while putting the word “innovation” in an office title or position description is an important step, it doesn't suddenly make your organization innovative.

Innovation comes from a marriage of [collaboration](#) and empathy. These are traits of organizations that embrace the concept of [open innovation](#).

What is Open Innovation?

[Henry Chesbrough](#), a professor at Berkley Business School, wrote the book ([literally](#)) on open innovation.

He states that there are two parts to this concept. The first is the process for bringing external ideas and technologies into your organization. The other part is thoughtfully sharing your organization's ideas and technologies with other organizations.

Essentially, this is a federated approach to innovation. Chesbrough notes that “useful knowledge today is widely distributed” and that no organization, irrespective of size, can innovate in isolation. He also emphasizes the creation of an overarching structure to bring learnings and ideas together from numerous sources.

On one level, it seems counter-intuitive to share openly with potential competitors, even if what's shared isn't strategic to your organization. However, this sharing builds collaboration and promotes [empathy, which drives innovation](#).





Open Innovation in Academia

I had a chance to see this model firsthand during a recent visit to SUNY Polytechnic Institute. There, I met [Michael Fancher](#), Director of the New York State Center for Advanced Technology in Nanoelectronics and Nanomaterials. He shared the fascinating work he oversees and highlighted the fact that his facility collocates leading small-, medium- and large-sized companies from around the world, all of which are working on various aspects of nanotech. They share ideas, workspaces, tools and infrastructure in an open innovation ecosystem.

In 2013, SUNY Poly won a bid to create the New York Power Electronics Manufacturing Consortium. In this initiative, they provide the architecture that connects over 100 cutting-edge companies. They are a neutral partner with the responsibility to protect intellectual property while enabling open innovation.

Their approach paid off.

Last year, the consortium and open innovation scored a [major success](#) in the creation of a new power electronics chip using silicon carbide. This is a major advancement with the potential to drive down costs for many products and to create high paying jobs in New York State.

Open Innovation in Government

I recently experienced another great example of this approach when I attended the 2018 annual Library of Congress *Designing Storage Architectures for Digital Collections* meeting.

The Library's mission is the preservation of knowledge. Much of their collection is [digital](#), which requires an unbelievable amount of storage. So, any new ideas from industry have the potential to revolutionize the Library's technology strategy.

Annually, the [Library's IT leadership](#) brings together leading technical experts on digital preservation to share their challenges and achievements with storage technology. Competitors sit side by side as presenters discuss advancements and new ideas.



Unlike similar events I've attended where industry speaks to government, these presentations were not about products and offerings. There was a strict prohibition against the technology companies from "selling." The sole purpose of the Library bringing these diverse organizations together was for everyone to share information, learn from each other and ultimately drive new storage advancements and mission success.

How to Create Open Innovation

As a leader, what can you do to establish a culture of open innovation like at SUNY Poly and The Library? I suggest the following steps to inspire collaboration and empathy.

- **Share Challenges:** Our ingrained risk-avoidance often prevents us from reaching out to others when we can't solve a problem. This has changed over time with concepts like [open data](#) and tools like [challenge.gov](#), so we have some good examples of how to ask for help. As part of the storage conference, the Library facilitated a joint conversation on criteria for their preservation storage needs. Everyone in attendance provided input.
- **Bring People Together:** Geographically dispersed teams are how we work today, but proximity matters, especially when we need real collaboration. SUNY Poly co-locates numerous business and research teams to create a space that promotes idea sharing and relationships. Open office approaches promote this kind of work environment.
- **Seek to Understand:** Use the opportunity of sharing challenges in intimate settings to seek out unique viewpoints. Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues that help you understand how other people view your challenge. This is empathy at its best and expands your perspective.

Organizations that embrace these concepts view these steps as a feedback loop, supporting new challenges and opportunities as they emerge throughout the process.

Final Thoughts

Open innovation is not easy, but it is worth it. It has the power to reduce costs, accelerate problem-solving and make a real difference in your mission.

What are you waiting for? Open your mind to innovation today!



You might also be interested in [Improving Productivity Through Workplace Culture Innovation](#) and [How to Create Intentional Innovation](#).

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