

Building Innovation-Ready Teams

Why Most Organizations Stifle the Thing They Say They Want



**Most organizations are perfectly
designed *to prevent innovation.***

They just don't realize it yet.

It's Not a Talent Problem

You already have the people.

What you don't have are the conditions.

Who Creates the Conditions?

Leaders do. And most of the time, they're creating the wrong ones.

- Approval culture disguised as quality control
- Risk aversion disguised as rigor
- Alignment meetings that produce compliance, not commitment

THE THREE CONDITIONS



Safe to Try



**Allowed to
Move**



Built to Learn

PART ONE · SAFE TO TRY

**Culture either enables innovation
or constrains it.**

There is no neutral.

What people choose to risk depends entirely on what the culture rewards.



If it takes courage, *it isn't safe.*

Safe to Speak Up

"I won't be punished for speaking up."

A baseline. Without it, nothing works.

Safe to Try

"I can act on an unproven idea without guaranteeing the outcome."

The unlock. This is where movement happens.

If only the brave ones try new things, it isn't safe — it's survivable for the courageous. And courage doesn't scale.

The Risk Reframe

Innovative cultures don't just tolerate risk.
They're motivated by the risk of NOT acting.

The bigger risk isn't doing it wrong — it's doing nothing at all.

Three Ways to Kill Experimentation

You don't have to mean to do it. You just have to do it once.

- 01** A leader publicly questions a failed experiment.
- 02** A review process requires perfection before launch.
- 03** A reward system recognizes individual output over team learning.

Three Things to Try

- 01** Open your next team meeting by sharing something you got wrong recently – model it first
- 02** Replace one formal review cycle with a “show rough work” session where nothing needs to be finished
- 03** When someone surfaces a problem, respond with “thank you” before responding with anything else

SAFE TO TRY · DISCUSSION

Does your team bring problems to light...
or have they learned it's safer not to?



Leaders don't produce innovation.
*They produce ... or destroy, the
conditions for it.*

**Transformation doesn't fail
because teams resist.**
*It fails because leaders don't
provide air cover.*

The blocker is rarely the team. It's almost always above them.

Teams are almost always more capable of change than their leaders assume.

Three Shifts Leaders Have to Make

From managing outputs → designing environments

Your job isn't to ship the work. It's to shape the conditions that ship the work.

From controlling decisions → clarifying guardrails

Say what's off the table. Then get out of the way.

From reviewing work → removing barriers

Find what's slowing the team, and kill it before the next review cycle.

Language Matters

What you say shapes what they do.

"Run it by me first." → **"Here's the boundary ... move."**

"Why did this fail?" → **"What did we learn, and how fast?"**

"We need alignment." → **"We need a shared outcome, not a shared opinion."**

ALLOWED TO MOVE · EMPOWERMENT

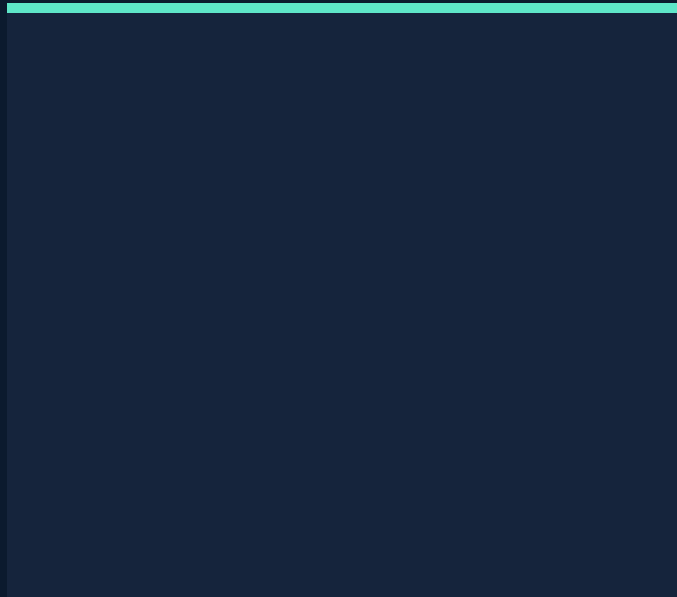
**Empowerment that requires approval isn't
empowerment.**
It's theater.



People stop believing in empowerment long before they stop pretending to.

The Decision Audit

Currently decided
alone



Requires approval,
but shouldn't



Genuinely needs
escalation



Most teams discover that +70% of what they escalate doesn't actually need to be escalated.

Where does your team wait for
permission *when they don't need to?*

**Most organizations are
designed to produce.**
*Very few are designed
to learn.*



Outputs vs. Outcomes

Output

Something we produce.

Reports, features, slides, deliverables.

Outcome

The result of what we produce.

Behavior change, revenue, customers served, problems solved.



When teams align to outcomes, ideas get bigger. Decisions get better. Tradeoffs get clearer.

Innovation lives at intersections.

Not inside departments.

- 01** Organize around capabilities, not titles.
- 02** Build M-shaped teams — depth in multiple areas, breadth across others.
- 03** Do the work together, so rounds of review and approval aren't needed.

Replace Approvals with Work Sessions

From

Brief -> Draft -> Review -> Revision -> Review -> Approval

To

Work Session -> Refinement -> Done

The Innovation Loop in Practice

Time Box 1 – Frame the problem – what are we actually trying to learn?

Time Box 2 – Build the cheapest possible test – rough prototype, survey, mockup

Time Box 3 – Put it in front of real users – not stakeholders... users

Time Box 4 – Decide – scale it, adjust it, or kill it

Speed of learning beats speed of production. *Every Time.*

Speed without direction is just expensive motion.

Faster, compared to what?



BUILT TO LEARN · KNOW WHEN TO STOP

Kill What Isn't Working.

Fast teams know when to stop.

Killing a bad idea early isn't failure - *it's the fastest path to a better idea.*

Give your teams explicit permission to stop what isn't working.

One breakthrough is luck. *A system that repeats is design.*

01

Build rituals, not just rules.

Repeatable behaviors beat one-off events.

02

Measure learning velocity, not just throughput.

How fast you learn determines how fast you compound.

03

Reward the process, not just the result.

What you celebrate is what gets repeated.

What does your organization measure?
Output or learning?

AI doesn't make organizations better.
It makes whatever's already there stronger.

SILOED ORGS + AI = FASTER SILOED THINKING

COLLABORATIVE ORGS + AI = FASTER COLLABORATIVE THINKING

This is why innovation-ready teams matter more — not less — in the age of AI.

Three Questions Before You Turn On AI

Safe to Try

If two teams produced conflicting recommendations, does your organization have a way to resolve that without escalating to the top?

Allowed to Move

Do teams currently have the autonomy to act on what they learn, or do insights sit in a queue waiting for approval?

Built to Learn

Can a cross-functional group in your organization present a shared strategy... not a departmental one?

Six Things to Take With You



The conditions you build determine the future you get.

- 01** Your people aren't the problem. Your conditions are.
- 02** Make it safe to try. Then make courage rational.
- 03** Empowerment has to be real, not declared.
- 04** Design your systems to learn, not just produce.
- 05** AI will amplify whatever you already are.
- 06** Run a decision audit with your team this month.

YOUR MOVE



What's the one thing
you'll change this week?

Write it down.

Share it with your neighbor.

CLOSE

**Make it safe to try.
Give people the authority to move.
Build systems that learn.**

The rest takes care of itself.



Preston Chandler

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