Embedding innovation in your organisation's DNA

How many of these seven principles can you tick?

- Lead by inspiring example
- Create habits of sharing and reflection
- Act on customer data and insights
- Stimulate experimentation and learning
- Invest in fun and creativity
- Stay curious and learn from others
- Open up for (unusual) collaborations

To foster new ideas, innovation needs to be an integral part of your organisation. Keeping these principles in mind will help you to embed innovation more successfully into your approach and working culture.

Innovation is not just for creative tech startups or multinationals with dedicated R&D teams - we can all be innovators! Organisations must innovate in order to keep adding value for their customers, and adapting in a sector that is rapidly evolving.

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Putting the seven principles into practice: examples from last mile distributors

Lead by inspiring example
As a leader, think big, test new ideas and create space for (and reward) team members to do the same.

Create habits of sharing and reflection
Incentivise staff to share failures as well as successes, and create safe spaces for them to question and push themselves, as well as each other. This way you find opportunities to innovate.

Act on customer data and insights
Take a human-centred design approach, using regular customer-level data and insights, to ensure you know what your customers’ pain points are. These could help to spark new ideas! Importantly, engage customer-facing staff in this process.

Stimulate experimentation and learning
Allow employees to deviate from the script as they try out new ideas, and embrace failure as part of the organisation’s learning journey. Trial by error is an inevitable part of innovation; so do not be bothered about getting things right the first time. Instead, experiment and iterate until you get it right.

Invest in fun and creativity
Allow team members time and space to be creative. Creative workplaces and online tools, particularly for remote-workers, enable employees to become confident and collaborative problem-solvers.

Stay curious and learn from others
Don’t just stay in your own bubble; meet with peers (and competitors), and take a genuine interest in the open exchange of ideas. Take inspiration from other sectors as well, adapting proven solutions to your own context.

Be open to (unusual) collaborations
Explore new partnerships, even when the short-term gain is not obvious - you may find innovative ways to realise your common goals together. And if not, you’ll still have learned something.

After seeing Kenyan farmers struggling to water their crops, the director of Mwezi challenged his team to figure out how they could sell irrigation solutions. Despite lacking agricultural backgrounds, the team soon came up with a simple, digital sales support tool for Mwezi agents.

Recognising the importance of good communication flows in its sales teams, Biahaa Sasa leverages tools like Slack and WhatsApp and enables regular team check-ins. Every week sales supervisors gather virtually to share achievements, mistakes and bottlenecks; helping each other to find solutions.

Besides collecting impact related insights to report to their investors, Solibrium Solar understands the value of customer care and establishing good relationships with customers. When one of their customers pointed Solibrium Solar to a potential, new microfinance partner this resulted in a new partnership that would not otherwise have been discovered.

Appreciating the importance of having freedom to experiment and learn, Sanergy established a small, dedicated R&D team to explore how emerging technologies, such as Virtual Reality, can be rolled out to help their agents sell improved latrines.

When iSocial added milk powder to their agents’ basket, they organised a contest in which team members were challenged to sell the milk powder, using non-conventional sales and marketing techniques. This led to many new creative ideas, some of which have been taken forwards by the company.

Recognising the potential to learn from each other, four last mile distributors formed a working group to exchange best practices. This not only resulted in cross-pollination of ideas, it also led to a merger between two of the companies, Pollinate Energy and Empower Generation, a first for the last mile distribution sector.

When service provider Nithio developed innovative machine learning models that merge geospatial data and customer repayment data to produce credit risk insights, they knew they would need to bring in others to test them. Vitalite Zambia opened up to a pilot project with Nithio, to see how the technology enhances the accuracy of their consumer credit assessments.