

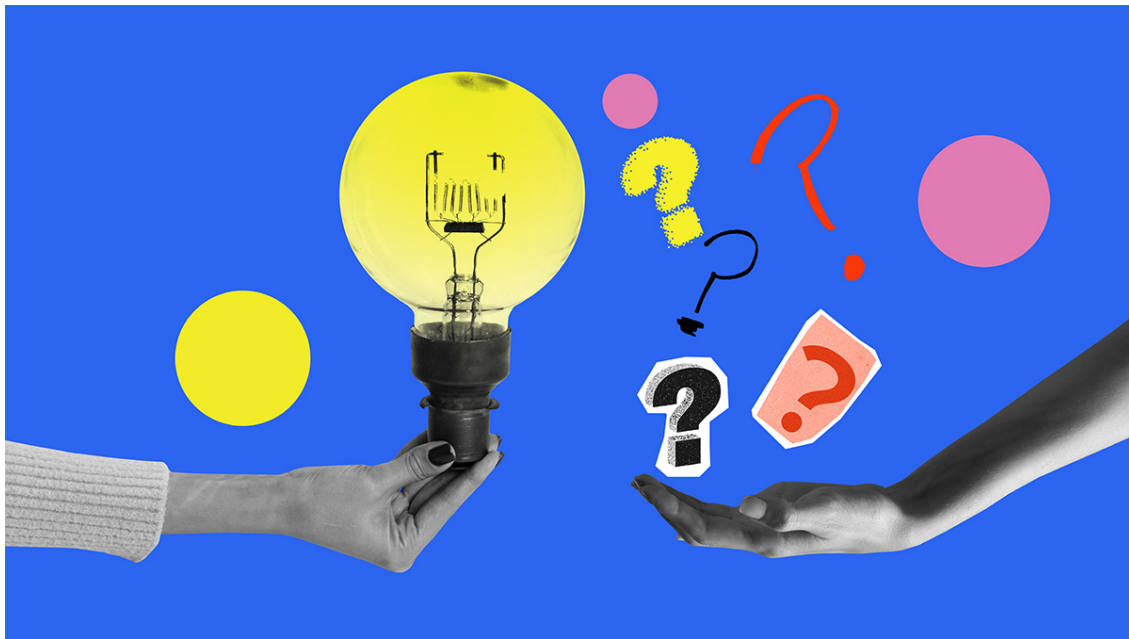


Managing Yourself

3 Steps to Cultivate an Innovator's Mindset

by Soren Kaplan

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Summary. If you want to move up the corporate ladder, you need to do more than meet deadlines and produce strong results. Employees who quickly move up often have an innovator's mindset. These people ultimately position themselves as valuable assets by... [more](#)

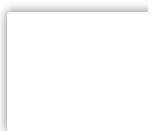
Imagine you're playing a video game where you must overcome challenges and unlock rewards in order to move up to the next level. Climbing the corporate ladder at work is similar, but instead of battling dragons or building cities, you're navigating office politics and aiming to deliver on goals. You're also not going at it

alone. Your peers are often competing alongside you for the next promotion.

You might be wondering: If everyone's playing the same game, how do I get ahead?

Doing your job well usually isn't enough. In a business landscape that prizes creative thinking and breakthrough results, it takes more than following orders and ticking boxes to stand out. Employees who quickly move up the corporate ladder often have a very specific quality: an innovator's mindset. These people ultimately position themselves as valuable assets by questioning assumptions and pushing their organizations to stay competitive. By consistently bringing fresh ideas to the table and demonstrating a proactive approach to problem-solving, they naturally attract the attention of higher-ups.

Take the example of my client, Paula Barg, who's currently a vice president (VP) at the health care services giant, Cencora. Within just two years of joining the organization, she secured two promotions and leapfrogged from the role of director into VP, bypassing the typical senior director title. Rather than simply checking off her to-do list each day, Paula continually took the initiative to improve the company's systems. She observed their processes, identified gaps, proposed solutions, and even helped spearhead a company-wide employee community that now includes more than 1,000 internal innovators. Her forward-thinking attitude has since made her an essential player on Cencora's global products and solutions team.



The main takeaway: When you come up with an idea that improves the customer experience, saves people time and money, or makes your organization perform better in a competitive market, those achievements don't go unnoticed. With the right mindset (one focused on innovation) you, too, can set yourself apart and gain an edge in your organization. This is true for anyone, at any level, looking to fast track their career.

Developing an Innovator's Mindset

As I describe in my latest book, *Experiential Intelligence*, your mindset consists of your attitudes and beliefs. If your attitude is about doing the bare minimum because you believe you can't make any real difference in your work, you probably won't shine like a star. On the other hand, if you're focused on enhancing your work (and your life) through curiosity, creativity, and continuous learning, you're better positioned to discover and create new opportunities in every area of what you do. In other words, you're more likely to develop an innovator's mindset.

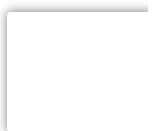
Here's how to get started.

1) Embrace curiosity when problem-solving.

Curiosity fuels innovation by encouraging you to question the status quo and explore new possibilities. When you approach tasks — even tedious ones — with a sense of wonder, you're more likely to discover novel solutions to existing problems. This proactive inquiry can lead to process improvements, product innovations, and new business models that can significantly advance your organization's success.

What does this look like in practice?

Before diving into a project, consider asking questions that will help you and others think outside of the box: What is the root



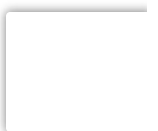
cause of the problem I'm trying to solve? How can I add the greatest value, as fast as possible, and with the least investment? Is there an opportunity to make a bigger impact — something I'm not seeing? The goal is to gain insight into the underlying issue and to identify any assumptions you might be making that could limit your productivity and results.

When you are curious and solution-oriented in this way, you can focus your energy on finding innovative ways to overcome challenges rather than becoming mired in the problems themselves.

For example, let's say your manager drops a project in your lap that sounds tedious: revamping the interface of your company's website. Instead of groaning and doing the bare minimum, get curious about the big picture. Ask questions like: What would surprise and delight the customer? How can we revamp our process to make it 10 times better? You might even interview users about their experiences to test your own assumptions before putting in valuable time and resources.

The point is: Asking thoughtful questions — and proactively trying to answer them — can set you apart from the crowd.

This is exactly what happened when a relatively unknown analyst at Netflix, Todd Yellin, took on the seemingly mundane task of enhancing their user interface. Instead of simply tweaking visuals, Yellin got curious. He knew customer behavior was important, so he started tracking what people watched, how long they watched, what they watched next, and what time of day they were watching. In the end, the insights from this data helped him reimagine how users interact with the Netflix platform. He spearheaded the development of an algorithm that predicts and suggests content to people based on their viewing history.



Yellin's work not only boosted user engagement and satisfaction, but it also positioned him as a pivotal figure in the company's evolution, leading to his promotion to VP of product innovation. His initiative demonstrates the power of innovative thinking in transforming an entire business.

Pro Tip: After every project, list out what didn't work and how it provides insights for future endeavors. Through this practice, you can build resilience — a quality that will allow you to bounce back from setbacks and view them as essential steps in the learning process, even in the face of skepticism or obstacles. This persistence can lead to breakthroughs that can advance your career.

2) Foster continuous learning.

The business landscape is ever-changing. Just consider how artificial intelligence has recently taken the corporate world by storm. By dedicating time to continuous learning — whether you do this in or outside of work hours — you ensure that your skills and knowledge remain relevant and cutting-edge. This commitment to growth can enhance your ability to contribute to your organization and make you a more attractive candidate for advancement.

What does this look like in practice?

Allocate an hour a week to learning. Explore news relevant to your area of expertise, attend a networking event or conference, or take an online course to complement your current projects and extend your skill sets. The goal here is to stay up to date with the latest industry trends, upskill when necessary, and become highly skilled in your area of interest. The more tools you have at your disposal, the easier it will be for you to adapt, shift directions,



and think creatively about how to problem solve when confronted with new challenges.

Outside of work, exploring hobbies and gaining new experiences can also prove useful — as research shows dabbling in creative activities can help us build new skills and boost our creativity on the job. As an example, consider my client Alan Chen, a consultant at the healthcare consulting firm The Krinsky Company. Alan found a way to integrate his passion for acting into his professional life in ways that resulted in a promotion. The practice of acting helped him learn how to observe and empathize with other people on a deeper level. By sharpening these abilities, Alan was able to better understand his clients and teach them how to think from the perspective of their customers, further improving their products. His improvisation skills also allowed him to think more flexibly in the face of unexpected change, and guide his team in adopting more agile work methods.

Pro tip: Make a list of the skills you want to develop. Look for articles, TED videos, online courses through LinkedIn or Coursera, and experts to follow on social media that can help you gain that knowledge. Take what you learn and share it with your team, which can help advance your projects while positioning you as a go-to person with these new skills.

3) Encourage open collaboration.

Innovation thrives in environments where ideas are shared freely and diverse perspectives are valued. Open collaboration fosters a sense of community and collective ownership over projects, increasing the likelihood of innovative outcomes. In fact, great innovation often comes from working across teams and departments, and people who understand how to build bridges across those silos can help drive it.



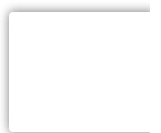
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Create a monthly brainstorming session with your team or peers. Instead of hoarding ideas and working solo on projects, take the lead to help facilitate dialogue and feedback, which will set you apart as a bridge-builder who recognizes the importance of collaboration for innovation.

For example, say you're working on a project to improve customer satisfaction in your department. Instead of tackling the project alone, organize a monthly brainstorming session with your team. During these sessions, encourage open dialogue and invite everyone to share their feedback. This collaborative approach will not only generate multiple solutions for you to mull over as a group, but it will also foster a sense of teamwork and shared purpose. By facilitating these sessions, you position yourself as a forward-thinking leader who values collective creativity — and you will likely end up delivering better results.

Pro tip: Keep a weekly innovation journal to jot down ideas and reflections. Take the lead on your team to share your thoughts and encourage others to do the same. Reflection allows you to assess your experiences, understand your thought processes, and identify areas for personal and professional growth. This introspection can reveal patterns, opportunities for innovation, and areas where a change in approach could lead to better outcomes.

Cultivating an innovator's mindset is more than a personal development goal. It's a strategic career move. By embracing this mindset — and the behaviors that come with it — you can position yourself as a forward-thinking, adaptable, and dynamic professional, ready to contribute to your organization's success as a future leader.





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