

# A Global Survey Explains Why Your Employees Don't Innovate

David SturtJordan Rogers

Source : Harvard Business Review



Ask a roomful of CEOs if they want a workforce that innovates, and you'd be shocked *not* to see all hands in the air.

But how many CEOs really mean what they say? Do they truly believe that innovative work can be left to the non-management ranks – and do they give individual contributors the time and resources they need to do so?

We surveyed nearly 3,500 people from companies in the U.S., Canada, the UK, Germany, and India. What we found is that although a majority of employees say innovation is everybody's responsibility, not everyone actually gets the resources needed to innovate.

There's an especially large disconnect on this subject between leaders and lower-level employees. While nearly nine in ten non-managers strongly believe they ought to be involved in innovation, far fewer (roughly six in ten) say they actually are. We saw this at small as well as large companies and among all age groups (Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials).

The problem? Most employees believe that management does not inspire them to do great work — or give them the opportunity to do so. Fewer than half of those in the lower ranks who have the chance to think through an idea believe they have access to the necessary means to execute it: money, staff, and support.

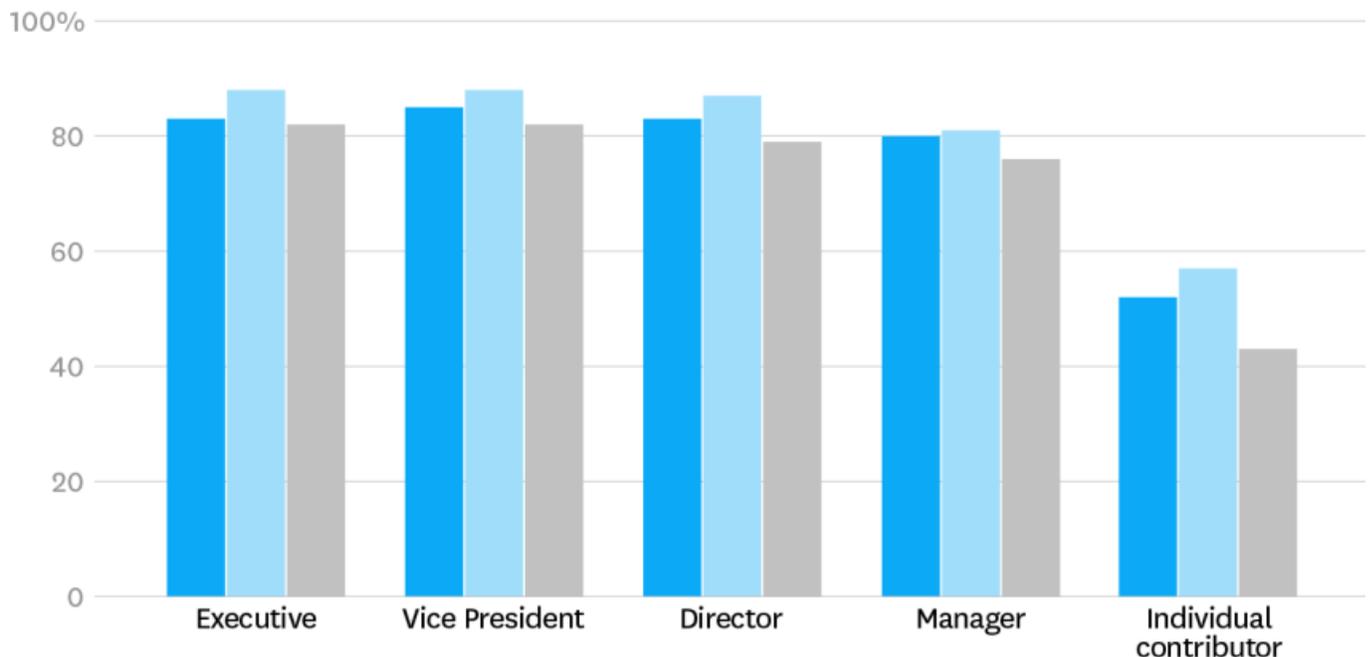
## Individual Contributors Don't Get the Resources They Need to Innovate

### PERCENTAGE WHO AGREE

I was **encouraged** to think about new ways of doing things

I had **time** to think about process improvements

I had **access** to adequate resources to innovate (staffing, funding, support)



SOURCE O.C. TANNER

© HBR.ORG

While executive and management ranks clearly have the right tools at their disposal — encouragement, time, and resources — to do great work, individual employees seldom feel they do. “My supervisors do not seem receptive to new ideas and implementation,” one employee told us. Added another: “No matter what you do, [my boss] says it’s got to be *her way*.”

These are disturbing conclusions. If executive endorsement of innovation comes off as largely empty talk, employees are likely to become disillusioned, perhaps cynical. Even those who are self-motivated may stop caring, unless they have the backing — material and moral support — from their leaders.

Without it, a dispiriting work environment can become a dysfunctional company: poisonous to productivity, to say nothing of radical breakthroughs.

How to halt the downward spiral? Leaders need to embrace innovative work as everyone’s responsibility — and mean it. They should also look for ways to encourage the best ideas coming from any employee.

Like most people, executives don’t change their habits overnight. But it might behoove leaders to take a few simple steps:

- Ask yourself if you really believe your own rhetoric about expecting all employees to find new and better ways to do their work. If you do, how can you underscore a genuine message to everyone? For example, in town halls or company meetings, give credit to employees who have done some recent innovative work, and underscore how important that type of work is to the whole organization.
- Spend time visiting with employees one-on-one. Are they sitting on some great ideas that could help your company?
- Finally, think about what resources you can provide to make untapped contributions happen. You might not want to redirect huge budget dollars. But perhaps you can make a mentor available or give an employee an afternoon every week to work on a special project of value to the team.

Innovation is everyone’s business. And it starts from the top.

David Sturt is Executive Vice President at O.C. Tanner Co. and leader of the O.C. Tanner Institute.

Jordan Rogers is a senior analyst for the O.C. Tanner Institute.