

How to approach innovation



Here's the big issue – most organisations/teams/individuals only embark on innovation if they can travel in ways that reinforce existing routines. We seek new results through habitual methods. I call this conundrum the difference between *'action'* – busily launching lots of innovation initiatives yet not fundamentally shifting underlying mindsets and ways of operating, and *'movement'* – rewiring the very source of how your entity currently generates its results. When you innovate through movement, and not just more action, the system's underlying capacity to innovate becomes second nature. How much more effortless and less costly might that be!

So, the question becomes, how to do innovation in a way that achieves deep movement? In what way does *how you approach innovation* fundamentally determine where you end up?

In the two decades since Stephen Johnson published his groundbreaking book [Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software](#), I have introduced to many organisations the principles and practices of what I call an “emergent” approach to the leadership of change. And to spectacular outcomes. When innovation is approached in this way, both my experience and my [research](#) shows that leading change emergently results in rapid adaptation to highly uncertain and complex contexts.

The concept of ‘emergence’ draws heavily from the study into what are known as ‘[complex adaptive systems](#)’, entities that can continually innovate to changing contexts in and of their own accord, with no need for a central command-and-control intelligence centre. And isn't that where today's organisations are needing to head?

Here are the six principles I have created that take the insights from complexity science into the practicalities of organisational change and innovation.

1. *Have a loose intention and set of 'hard rules', and within that, 'press play and see what happens'.* Innovation is a creative process that needs some overall statement of an unmet need, but it doesn't need a detailed predetermined vision. So, give up a need to control outcomes and articulate instead the biggest question that needs answering. But at the same time, innovation is aided by boundaries, statements of the micro-level behaviour needed to govern the pattern of the overall entity. Just take a look at the four “[Viking Laws](#)” that for centuries guided the flourishing of a trading nation across the globe, yet who could operate without the need for a centralised governing body, and how they can inform the world of business today.
2. *Start in a small way around 'ripe issues' that have large consequences.* Using the skill of tuning in deeply to your organisational system or wider societal need, uncover the hot spots that appear to be a ‘fractal’ of the wider issue you are trying to solve, and which hold an innate energy for change. Don't try to launch innovation through a single grand programme. When you can innovate in these hot spots, that hold clues for the whole system, this ['positive deviance'](#) can be amplified and spread elsewhere.

3. *Work step by step – using trials and experiments, and adjust as you go.* When you lead change emergently, you give up any notion of a fixed medium-to-long-term plan. Our contexts are changing too fast for that. Rather, you simply focus on what is needed now, and next. Through iterative processes such as design thinking and rapid prototyping, you create partial solutions that are tested with the intended ‘beneficiaries’ of the innovation, and then adapted. This, more messy approach to innovation can work against the grain of perfection-seeking and control, and it requires that its leaders create a culture in which ‘failure’ or disturbance is framed as learning, not disaster.
4. *Build skills in changing the here-and-now moment.* You can only change the present, not the past, or the future. The challenge is that the ‘default’ neural networks in our brains are either obsessing about past events, or, busily planning what is still to come. Unless you can cultivate the capacity to activate the ‘attentional’ network in your brain, which bends your awareness to what is here, now, then you might miss the unfolding novelty of the present moment. You can’t change what you don’t notice. The potential for innovation – in a conversation with a customer whose needs are changing, in a chance encounter with a work colleague who has a crazy yet fruitful idea – is simply missed. Just [take a look](#) at the evidence between the ability to cultivate a greater degree of so-called “mindfulness”, and creativity.
5. *Use informal, lateral networks and volunteers.* To spread the innovation, or positive deviance, from the hot spots, make sure you have rich peer-to-peer type common interest groups. Innovation is not amplified by the need to go up and down a formal hierarchy with all its reporting checks and balances. The world is changing around use. Technology and social media can now connect us in ever-increasing circles. Hierarchies are collapsing. In today’s world, innovation and change is best fuelled by having an inspiring loose intention and seeing ‘who shows up’ to help you further it.
6. *At all times, cultivate the emergent conditions of connectivity, diversity and rapid feedback loops.* While you can’t directly control emergent change and innovation, you can command it. And that is through the continual attention to its [conditions](#). Back to the study of complex adaptive systems – they are seen to be most healthily innovative when they contain rich interactions between their multiple parts, have the maximum requisite variety to match the systemic context that is shifting, and operate through the rapid spread of information about how well the system is performing. How does such connectivity across boundaries, more ‘whole system’ difference, and the empowered building of collective intelligence show up in the system in which you are leading innovation?

So, in summary, I contend that the best way to get to true innovation is to pay as equal attention to the *how*, the process of innovation, as you do to the *what*, the subject matter for your innovation. And, that the most appropriate how, or approach to innovation in today’s world, is an emergent change one. Final health warning – emergent change does require quite a different leadership style and skill set. One that gives up hierarchical control and fixed outcomes, can deeply tune into a system’s unconscious routines, works with simply setting a loose frame and micro-level boundary conditions, and then trusts the people around them to deliver.



Notes:

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Deborah Rowland has led change in major global corporations including BBC Worldwide, Gucci Group, PepsiCo and Shell where she has had Vice-President of Organisational Development and Group HR Director roles. She is the author of *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change* (Wiley 2017) and co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (Wiley, 2008). In addition to speaking, writing and teaching on the subject Deborah now consults to institutional leaders around the world on how to implement change in more effortless ways. In the 2017 Thinkers50 Radar she was named one of the new generation of management thinkers changing the world of business. She tends to her own inner game via regular yoga, meditation, art gazing, painting and walks in nature, in particular along the spectacular coastal paths of Southern Cornwall.

