



Implementing Innovation



Creating a culture of advanced thinking and creativity for business

By John Prue, CPRP

Many of us like to think of ourselves as innovators, or as being creative in our day-to-day jobs. However, that is not always the case. While I do believe everyone can have those attributes, sometimes it takes effort and focus to make innovation and creativity a part of your own repertoire in the business world or a part of your organization's culture.

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According to world-renowned entrepreneur Richard Branson: “There is no substitute for innovation. Original ideas will always rise to the top.” I believe we all can agree, that is true. However, what exactly is innovation, and where does the creativity behind it come from? We have all heard the term “thinking outside the box,” and although that might capture it perfectly, there is a bit more to it. Organizational innovation not only fosters a culture where people are encouraged to create new thoughts and ideas, but also allows for the action of putting these new ideas into practice despite challenges, resistance, risk and other outside factors. This is no different in the

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park and recreation profession. We need to build the environment for creativity, innovation or new ideas, and then establish the proper business culture to follow that through to execution. The bottom line is that innovation can translate to successful programs, new revenue, cost savings or streamlined efforts.

Implementing Innovation at Your Agency

How can you harness innovation’s potential for your own organization? As mentioned above, developing a culture or an environment for creativity and innovation is the first step. Keep in mind, you also want to make this culture sustainable, so it must be a part of every level of your organization. This means referencing the importance of innovation in organizational communication, rewarding efforts put toward innovation, and ensuring people

have the time to participate.

What would happen if you allowed your staff dedicated and consistent time during the work week for these efforts? For actual working groups or innovation teams, some companies, like Google, can offer up to 20 percent of the work day for creativity and innovation development. Determining the amount of time you want to devote within your own workforce is essential. Many factors are involved for each organization, but ultimately constituting a dedicated time toward innovations or teamwork in this area shows a true commitment.

Evaluating Risk

The risk to the organization is something that needs to be considered. Some innovative initiatives leave little risk to explore and can even include a pilot program to evaluate their effectiveness. However, the



Organizational Development for Creativity & Innovation

STARTS WITH LEADERSHIP Top Down

- Priorities
- Buy-In
- Experience/Training
- Resources

RECRUIT & TRAIN THE RIGHT PEOPLE People First

- Hiring Strategies
- Desired Skill Set
- Diversity/Experience
- Specific Training

CHALLENGE THE TEAM Encourage New Ideas

- Create the Culture
- Devote the Time
- Performance Goals
- Rewards & Recognition



MOTIVATED PEOPLE



FOCUS ON GOALS



ORGANIZATION SUCCESS

IMAGE COURTESY OF STEPHANIE HALE

great majority of innovative ideas will take time, levels of effort and will impact overall costs, which all become an organization's risk factor. A *Harvard Business Review* study has found that when organizations allocate approximately 70 percent of their innovation activity to low-risk projects, 20 percent to moderate-risk projects, and 10 percent to high-risk projects, they significantly outperform the competition. Park and recreation agencies can't afford to risk their entire organization on one big idea. Likewise, developing only small projects won't ever deliver a big win either. Managing your risk level is an important consideration as you develop your own "balanced portfolio" of these types of innovation projects.

Innovation as a Solution

Another part of innovation you need to consider is: What are you looking to fix, and why? It might be budget driven, such as a reduction of funds to provide the same services. Maybe it is internal efficiency issues or a need to find an efficient way to do business. In the business of parks and recreation,

oftentimes, the reason is to meet customer needs. Your "fix" could be a quality control-related issue driven from previous customer feedback, or it could be customer demand for new programs and services. In some cases, your customer demands also are driven by direct competition in your local area.

Resource Allocation

When looking to innovate, organizations need to ensure they devote the necessary resources to explore and implement innovation projects.

As we look at resources, it is easy to focus on the dollars, or the hard costs associated with cultivating, developing and implementing new ideas. However, it's more than just dollars — it requires a whole process or mindset, starting with leadership. For many of us in the park and recreation field, this may include a board or city council as well as the agencies' top leaders. All leadership need to prioritize innovation, which includes the delegation of the necessary human and financial capital to support that effort.

Finding the right people for innovation is important. Some organiza-

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tions are now adding job functions or responsibilities into position descriptions. They also are creating hiring strategies specific to finding these "innovators," or creative people, for their agencies. However, if you can't hire new talent and you have many good people doing good work, training to "innovate" might be the best way to manage your human capital in this direction.

Performance Goals

Once the leadership is committed, the team is established and culture for change is instituted, it's "go time." Leadership first needs to set the challenge or overall goal for the agency related to innovation. Once that is determined, you can create short-term performance goals for idea generation, along with team efforts to explore, develop and implement these approved innovation projects. The result: an engaged and motivated staff focused on goals will drive the "innovation train" to agency success.

Case Studies

Let's look at a few examples of innovation in practice within the park and recreation industry. Although these examples are from larger agencies, this does not prohibit any size organization from creating a culture of innovation that is scaled to their needs.

The Chicago Park District (CPD) took a direct path to tackling an age-old issue for most organizations — training and development. Approximately 13 years ago, CPD created a professional development manager position for community recreation. Leading up to that, CPD leadership knew that training had been inconsistent —

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there were concerns with training quality, along with overall support and availability for the staff. With the hiring of a professional development manager, the goal was to centralize training, set standards and launch a needs assessment for the district's Community Recreation Department. From that data, the district recognized a need to expand training throughout the organization and launched its Workforce Development Department. The department was created on essentially a zero-based budget, with staff throughout the district forming the team.

This new Workforce Development Department ultimately was responsible for:

- Coordinating with other departments to develop district-wide employee conferences that in-

clude soft and hard skills and role-specific training, such as dance class instruction, equipment use, emotional intelligence, seasonal sports, financial awareness and career advancement.

- Launching and maintaining a learning management system that contains a library of more than 2,000 custom and off-the-shelf online trainings, which staff can access anytime. This tool also tracks continuing education units, certifications, compliance and reporting. It also has career path trainings, so staff can prepare for their next position.
- Partnering with local colleges and universities to obtain discounts for staff, as well as to lead workshops.
- Creating and leading a variety of workshops, including the Certi-



fied Park and Recreation Professional test preparation course, emotional intelligence, career skills and facilitator trainings.

- Partnering with state and national associations to obtain additional learning opportunities for staff and to network with other professionals.
- Providing mental health and holistic support for all staff before, during and after a crisis.
- Leading the employee engagement experience, managing internal communications, creating an employee newsletter, and obtaining no-cost benefits for staff.
- Connecting with other organizations — such as financial institutions, an employee assistance program, mental health services and social security — to provide personal development opportunities.

The CPD leadership recognized an issue within training, development and employee engagement. They took a bold approach, using vision and teamwork, to solve the gap and went well beyond supporting their employees. The CPD Workforce Development Department continues today, focusing on training, professional development, employee engagement, communication and mental health support for all of the district's 3,000 employees and 2,000 seasonal staff.

Cleveland Metroparks is another agency that is doing some great things related to creative innovation. During the past year, they started a new program to harness the power of virtual reality (VR) through a partnership with University Hospitals Seidman Cancer Center. In meeting with current and former Seidman patients, Cleveland Metroparks identified a unique opportunity to “bring the parks to the people.” While VR cannot fully

re-create the experience of visiting an outdoor space in person, the technology shows great promise in empowering patients to access green spaces virtually that may otherwise be inaccessible for a variety of health or mobility reasons.

Through a generous donation, Cleveland Metroparks began capturing camera footage from its 18 park reservations and along the Lake Erie waterfront and installing it onto VR headsets. Specific sensory experiences — such as sitting under cherry blossoms, kayaking along the Cuyahoga River with views of Downtown Cleveland in the background, and hiking and biking the more than 24,000 acres in the Cleveland Metroparks — were developed to digitally capture the scenic natural resources available around the park district. Other area hospitals have used it for a wide variety of purposes, and this program continues to expand as some hospitals have shown interest in providing these experiences to caregivers to relieve stress. The use of VR technology in these hospitals provides users with an accessible new path to experience the park district.

These are just a few examples of how Cleveland Metroparks identified opportunities and adapted accordingly for the best interest of the organization. According to Brian Zimmerman, CEO for Cleveland Metroparks, “Our opportunities for innovation are not led by any dedicated department but are the result of a strong, forward-thinking leadership team across all divisions that is collaborative and engaged in the community.”

Opportunities for Innovation

As you can see, innovation can

come in different ways. It can stem from keeping an open mind to an issue or problem, can be an opportunity that arises to better serve your community, or presents a better way of doing business. Some park and recreation agencies have explored formal innovation teams. However, some have implemented innovation in a less formal but effective manner. The common denominator is strong leadership that desires creativity and innovative thinking from its people. The key to making this all work is that the entire team responds to the challenge, and that becomes a win-win scenario for all concerned.

In our world of parks and recreation, innovation is a product, program, service or business strategy that's new or fresh and ultimately useful to our organization and community. Innovations don't have to be major breakthroughs in technology or a brand-new business line; they can be as simple as upgrades to your organization's customer service, internal process changes for efficiency, or just simple adjustments added to an existing program delivery. We all have competition in some form or fashion, and innovation can help us engage with our own team and separate from our competitors.

The American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration has a task force committee on career development that has been focused on this and many other related topics. The task force is seeking more examples of innovative park and recreation approaches, best practices, and success stories on building a culture of innovation and creativity. If you would like to share any examples or best practices, reach out to them at info@aapra.org.

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