# 6 Innovation and Intelligent Risk-Taking – Curated Video Series
Crucial Conversations for Women in Management

1. **Topic**

As globalization and technology permeate every part of organizational life, tapping into the wellspring of ideas coming from employees, citizens, clients and stakeholders is critically important to meet strategic objectives. Balancing new ideas with current priorities means that leaders must become ‘idea brokers’ and innovators.

Innovation offers the opportunity to improve a program, product, policy or service. It also spurs creative disruption and change that is not always well-received by employees who prefer the status quo. When employees understand that their ideas are valued, and are encouraged to share those ideas with managers and executives, in a protected zone for experimentation, the organization’s ability to innovate is increased. Leaders must set the tone and embrace innovation as a strategy.

McKinsey and Company reports that several of the top inhibitors to innovation are: rewarding nothing but short-term performance; maintaining a fear of failure; and, bureaucratic or hierarchical environments where there are ‘gatekeepers’ who can reject or veto new ideas. Often innovation arises through cross-functional groups and networks in organizations. It does not necessarily require large-scale, change management initiatives.

One thing is certain – for innovation to flourish, leaders must examine closely their own behavior and **how it supports or inhibits innovation**. As an innovation leader, you cannot ask others to assume informed risks that you are not prepared to assume yourself. If you invite people to try a new way of doing business, and, you shut the process down at the first sign of a problem, or assign blame to others, you can expect to see innovation and new ideas vanish. Changing how intelligent risk-taking occurs, as a foundation for innovation, depends a great deal on the culture you create.

2. **Assignment**

Assess your operating environment and whether you, as a leader, are supporting innovation. Ask yourself:

a) Do people see me as a broker for new ideas in the organization, as someone who develops improvements?

b) What would my employees and peers say about my tolerance and appetite for risk-taking and experimentation?
c) Am I seen as someone who incubates or fosters new ideas in a ‘safe zone’ so that they can be developed and implemented successfully?

d) Do I encourage employees and peers to learn from setbacks or do I leap to judge them harshly and assign blame?

e) Am I assigning resources to employees who can take new ideas and grow them into innovations of value to the organization?

f) Do I fear being wrong and does this fear define my team’s way of acting?

g) Do I see risk as being a ‘negative’ or is it an opportunity to lead, to grow, and to innovate?

h) What risks do I need to take now to advance my career and my effectiveness as a leader?

Reflecting upon these questions can help you determine whether or not you are making a contribution to organizational excellence that stretches you beyond your comfort zone. You will also want to assess what happens when you don’t take a risk in doing something new and what you may have lost by ignoring an opportunity.

3. Video Descriptions and Instructions

You are to view two video presentations before reflecting upon a number of questions.

In the first video, Reshma Saujani, the founder of Girls Who Code, discusses how women and girls are being raised to be perfect and to avoid taking risks, in contrast to men and boys who are raised to be brave and to take risks, jumping into the ‘unknown’ headfirst. The Ted Talk (February 2016) is entitled, “Teach girls bravery, not perfection.” You can view the first 12 minutes of the video.

Saujani notes that, in Silicon Valley, unless you have ‘failed at least twice’ you are not taken seriously as an innovator. Organizational culture can’t leave behind half of the population of innovators who happen to be women. As a leader, women have to get comfortable with stretching beyond what they know and learn how to become innovation boosters. Inspiring innovation requires supporting employees who engage in courageous attempts at innovation, and temporarily removing the consequences for ‘failure.’ The Ted Talk can be found at this link: https://www.ted.com/talks/reshma_saujani_teach_girls_bravery_not_perfection?language=en

In the second video, Sara Blakely, the billionaire founder and CEO of Spanx, a women’s shapewear company, speaks about the importance of smart risk-taking. The video is 1.5 minutes long and can be found at: http://www.businessinsider.com/sara-blakely-spanx-ceo-offers-advice-redefine-failure-retail-2016-7

Ms. Blakely observes that her father expected her to excel in life and to embrace experimentation and risk-taking as a means of achieving excellence. He would ask her
every Friday evening at the dinner table, “What have you failed at this week?” She encourages leaders to build skills and confidence in risk-taking to achieve innovation outcomes – and to extend this to employees. Bill Treasurer, an author and leader, likens this approach to giving employees ‘training wheels’ on a bike and not removing them until they have built up a capacity to introduce more risks to produce innovations.

4. Follow-Up Activities and Application

After viewing these videos, you are being asked:

a) When you host a team or staff meeting, do you actively encourage women as well as men to contribute their ideas?
b) Have you created a space and collaboration tools, such as Google Docs, where your employees and peers can share their ideas in real time?
c) Are you creating a safe environment in which employees can innovate or bring ideas to your attention?
d) Do you encourage your team members to seek out new partners and approaches?
e) Do you lead the way? As an innovator, you can model innovation leadership by being the “first one up and off the dive platform.”
f) Are you innovating or are you stagnating?

Research conducted by Lynne Millward and Helen Freeman found that even though women and men are equally innovative, the gender of the inventor can also affect the perceived level of inventiveness. Women may also generate innovations in different ways. Failure in risk-taking was deemed to be less damaging to men because risk-taking was expected of men, whereas women were expected to behave in more adaptive ways. Women leaders must keep pace with their peers in innovating to create the future of their organizations.

Open markets for ideas, dynamic discovery processes, and creative experimentation allow leaders to adapt continuously. Innovating - and fostering an environment where innovators can thrive - provides leaders and their organizations with a lasting competitive advantage.

5. Expert Knowledge

Dawn Nicholson-O’Brien is the President and CEO of Celtic Oracle, an executive services consulting firm. A former executive in the Government of Canada, Dawn served in executive level roles during three and a half decades. She also served as the Vice President of the Institute on Governance, has developed and delivered advanced leadership programs for executives, and, she is the recipient of numerous leadership awards. Dawn is a sought after speaker and author (see www.celticoracle.ca).
6. Key Words

Key words include: intelligent risk-taking; innovation as a strategy; protected zone; experimentation; ideas broker; open markets for ideas; inventiveness; collaboration networks; competitive advantage; safe environment.

7. Additional Resources and Reading


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