

# Say “Yes” to Innovation: A Six-Part Series on Cultivating an Atmosphere for Change

## Part 1: What Exactly *Is* Innovation?



Does the pace of change in today’s world make you dizzy? The innovations in computer and internet technology alone are enough to overwhelm all but the most tech savvy among us.

It wasn’t always like this. When I entered the business world full-time in the seventies (yeah, I know, the dark ages), things changed, of course, but at a snail’s pace compared to today.

Today, every company, regardless of its maturity or that of its industry, has to scramble to differentiate and compete successfully. The marketplace is constantly demanding new products, services, business models, processes, and creative ideas. Recent emerging trends, including globalization and shifting technology – not to mention the fear of appearing obsolete or out-of-date – have increased the push for efficiency and effectiveness. We all know the buzzword for staying ahead: innovation.

But what exactly *is* innovation?

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You may think of innovation as simply a new idea, device, or method, or the application of better solutions or of changes made to an existing product, idea, or field of endeavor.

Improving the value and efficiency of a process, product, or service is an example of a *core innovation*; one that involves making an incremental change.<sup>i</sup> Think dishwasher detergent in a packet that eliminates mess and waste or a whole roasting chicken in a bag that can be popped right into the oven.

*Adjacent innovation* is the term used when a company reimagines an existing product and puts it to a new use. Think Proctor & Gamble’s *Swiffer*. This replacement for the traditional mop eliminated the need to clean the mop head, a step research showed was taking more time than actually mopping the floor. Another example of adjacent innovation is the Reebok Pump, a new basketball shoe that used an inflatable cushion around the ankle to reduce injuries.

And then there’s *disruptive innovation*, a term coined by Harvard professor Clay Christensen. It describes “a process by which a product or services evolves over time, following a path from the fringe (the low end of the market or a new market) to the mainstream, eroding the first incumbents’ market share and then their profitability.”<sup>ii</sup>

An example can be found in the story of Netflix and its disruptive path to displace Blockbuster Video. The company began by offering a large inventory of movies for rent. Customers waited days to receive the movies in the mail, but could rent more than one movie at a time. You sent one back, had at least one in reserve, and Netflix sent the next one. You managed it all online. The service appealed to a narrow audience of which I was a part. I didn’t care about the latest movie releases, I was an early adopter of the DVD player, and, since I found going to brick and mortar stores to be a waste of my time, I was rapidly becoming someone who shopped almost exclusively online.

At this point, Netflix wasn’t a threat to Blockbuster, so Blockbuster chose to ignore this upstart company and, boy, did they get their come-uppance! When Netflix took advantage of new technology and shifted to streaming videos over the internet, the

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company began to appeal to Blockbuster’s core customers. It was all downhill for Blockbuster after that.

Innovation can be something revolutionary like internet movie streaming. But more often it’s as simple as a staff member coming up with an idea for eliminating unnecessary work – like doing away with a report no one reads. Or it’s making a suggestion that improves the value and efficiency of necessary work, such as identifying and removing redundant steps in a process.

Engineers like you are uniquely positioned to innovate. After all, engineers have been responsible for many of the world’s greatest inventions and technology, from space shuttles to air conditioning systems to bridges. At the root of these big picture accomplishments are creativity and problem-solving prowess, staples of every good engineer’s toolbox. As *women* engineers, you bring still other essential tools to the innovation process. How so, you ask?

At the beginning of this blog, I said every company must innovate. The cautionary tale of Netflix and Blockbuster reinforces that. Anticipating and delivering on the changing needs of clients and customers requires companies that not only innovate today but are poised to innovate into the future. It all begins with strong and inspirational leaders.<sup>iii</sup>

And guess what? You as women engineers are particularly well-positioned to lead change and innovation. A study called the Everest Project and original research conducted by my business partner, Carol Mitchell, Ph.D.,<sup>iv</sup> show women are particularly good at creating cultures to support change, especially transformational, disruptive innovation.

This is a lot to take in, but because you’re an engineer, I know you’re up to the challenge. So, in the course of the next five blogs in this series we’re going to explore the role women and organizational culture play in innovation. Please check back next month for the second installment.

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<sup>i</sup> The information presented here about types of innovation and how much innovation is the right amount come from the September 2013 issue of an *Inc.* Magazine article written by Adam Bluestein. The article is titled *Debunking the Myth of Innovation*.

<sup>ii</sup> Clayton M. Christensen, Michael E. Raynor, and Rory McDonald, *What is Disruptive Innovation*, from the December 2015 issue of Harvard Business Review.

<sup>iii</sup> Pamela Carlton and Lily Tang, *Eve of Change: Women Redefining Corporate America*, The Everest Project, October 2014 to October 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Carol Vallone Mitchell, *Breaking Through Bitch: How Women Can Shatter Stereotypes and Lead Fearlessly*, Career Press, 2015