

## Innovating is No Solo

By Lanny Vincent

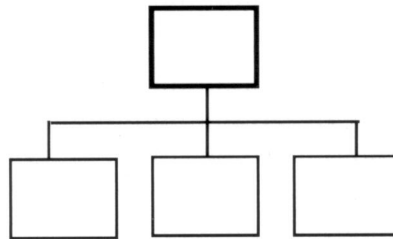
**I**nnovating is not a solo act. Collaboration is a necessity because innovating requires the support, cooperation and coordination of many diverse contributors all along the way.

Choreographing these collaborations is not simply a matter of getting some people together to do a little brainstorming here and there. Considering the stage of the innovation's development and where you are in the process suggest different collaboration "architectures" to enable people to work together more productively. There are at least three to choose from: organization, network and community. Innovators use all three architectures, but are wise to consider which one may be more appropriate based on the innovation's stage of development.

An organizational architecture for collaboration is typically hierarchical and

functional, designed to clarify and distribute accountabilities, coordinate known activities, control familiar operations, and optimize performance. Organizational collaboration is well suited for executing and implementing.

### Organization (Executes)



A network architecture is comprised of nodes and links between them, designed to transmit and transfer content between the nodes, receive multiple signals from

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## Forming versus Conforming Innovation

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**W**hile I am a big fan of Clayton Christensen's writings on innovation, his phrase "disruptive innovation" has always sounded to me a bit redundant. All innovations are to some extent "disruptive" if they qualify as an innovation.

Over the past three decades there have been a variety of attempts to differentiate not only types of innovation; e.g., product vs. process, technological vs. business method, etc., but also degrees of innovativeness; e.g., incremental versus radical, improvements versus breakthroughs, etc.

These attempts to differentiate degrees of innovativeness are only somewhat defensible when applied in hindsight. However, when these descriptors are used in planning discussions—as they often are—it feels like dividing a pie before it has been laid in the tin. It is similar to what parents can do to their children in their well intentioned but misdirected efforts to prescribe what their child will be and do when they grow up.

One alternative to using prescriptive adjectives in innovation planning is to consider the state of the innovating ecosystem. For example, where in the life cycle of the market or product category is the current state of the art? James Utterback's two-wave theory of innovation (product and process) is a useful framework to begin with. Utterback suggests that the first wave of innovation is the product wave, which has three stages: fluid, transition and specific phases.

In the fluid stage, product innovations are "formative," evidenced by the many companies making many different attempts to satisfy an identified need. When a critical mass of customers shows a bias

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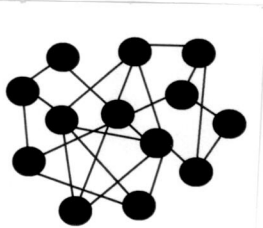
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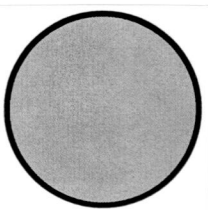
a variety of sources and interact with a diversity inputs. Networked collaboration is better suited for making connections than for coordinating.

## Network (Connects)



A community architecture centers and concentrates. It is designed to create knowledge and enable learning, nurture development and advance new value creation. The Institute for Research on Learning (IRL) found that learning occurs in and through community, in particular in “communities of practice.” Communal collaboration is better suited for discovering, inventing and developing.

## Community (Centers)



Experienced innovators know how and when to use all three types of architectures. Network collaboration is productive for exploring and discovering where new opportunities may be emerging, while organizational collaboration is essential for coordinating all the various activities required for a well-orchestrated launch and introduction. A community of practice may be best for invention and reduction-to-practice efforts. Collaborators can utilize two or more of the architectures at any one time, but each implies a different social contract or interpersonal protocol.

For collaborations driven by an organizational architecture there is typically an explicit or implied power hierarchy—some are more

powerful than others. Top-down authority is exercised and distributed in such a way as to get things done efficiently and minimize redundancy.

For collaborations enabled by network architecture there are often key nodes—those with more links. Bottom-up intelligence gathering and transmission of information and knowledge is of greater concern than the exercise of control. In a network structure, truth and discernment are more valuable than the political power required to mobilize resources needed for efficient execution. While the network structure may be inherently more resilient to system-wide failure (the Internet is an example), an organizational architecture may be inherently more efficient for focused execution of a predictable and known activity.

Compared to organizational and network architectures, community architecture may be more difficult but important to nurture and maintain. Why? Contrary to prevailing popular opinion, innovations derive more from the creation of new knowledge than from the generation of new ideas. Peter Drucker (*Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 1985) suggested the priority of knowledge-creation over idea generation over 25 years ago. Ikujiro Nonaka (*The Knowledge Creating Company*, 1995) observed that it’s not what a company knows that makes it successful but it’s ability to create new knowledge where it matters most. Then Al Ward—an insightful student of Toyota’s highly regarded Product Development System—described innovation as “learning applied to creating value.”

Reflecting on my own experience facilitating hundreds of brainstorming sessions confirms what these three sages have observed. The sessions that produced results were populated by participants who had deep knowledge of the subject matter and were immersed in learning the relevant causalities.

The IRL taught us that learning and knowledge-creation occur in community—especially in communities of practice. A challenge for innovators, therefore, is to carve out, nurture and protect communities

of practice for the knowledge-creation capability that is so essential to innovating. This is no trivial or easy task. It requires finesse to establish and maintain “insulation” from the often over-powering influence of organizational architectures. It also requires sustained and patient effort to concentrate attention long enough to understand underlying causalities, something for which networks are not well suited.

Organizations and networks are not necessarily communities; and communities often lack organization or become insular without the fresh perspectives that come from exposure to a broader network. Collaboration architectures are not mutually exclusive. They often coexist as people can participate in all three at the same time. However, without some involvement in a group where relationships matter as much as transactions, new knowledge will have a more difficult time emerging, and innovating will suffer as a result.

When invention is at the heart of an innovation it represents an instance of truth speaking to power. This requires those in power in the organization to respond by remobilizing resources appropriately, if the innovation is to be pursued and developed. The risk for those in power is ignoring the necessity of nurturing communities of practice, believing they can either organize or network their way to successful innovation. □

## Forming versus Conforming Innovation

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towards a “dominant design” the ecosystem moves out of the fluid state and into the transition state. This is when the next wave begins—the process innovation wave—and innovators must shift their focus from product innovation to process innovation.

Perhaps calling them “formative” innovations versus “conformative” innovations might be a more useful designation. Or perhaps we should worry less about how to describe innovations and worry more about how to nurture them whether they are disruptive or more “well behaved.” □