

# LITTLE INNOVATIONS THAT MAKE A BIG IMPACT

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Innovation is a requirement for professional success, especially today in our post COVID-19 world. Trusted ways of doing business don't always lead to the results leaders, owners, investors, and stakeholders need. Leaders across sectors are encouraging innovation, forward thinking, and an entrepreneurial spirit, to the point where these are now buzzwords. The value of such characteristics doesn't need to be sold or explained. If the past few years have taught us anything, it is the need to examine daily operations, find better ways of working, and be serious about creating innovative solutions to problems still invisible. The "why" is well explained by looking at the world around us, on international, national, regional, and local levels. This contribution seeks to answer "how."

## **Little Innovations: Innovation on the Margins**

The concept of innovation can seem overwhelming, especially for those working in existing, well-developed industries. When people think of innovation, what first comes to mind are giant companies known for revolutionizing entire industries. People often think of innovation as industry-changing products, like wearable technology or robots for the masses. Undoubtedly, this is true. However, such industry-changing innovations require massive amounts of investment. For many organizations, big innovation is probably out of reach on a daily basis. It's entirely possible, though, to enact what we call little innovations—innovation born from necessity as an organization considers how to solve a central, pressing problem.

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Einstein's saying that we cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them perfectly aligns with the concepts needed for innovation. Leaders in innovative small to mid-sized organizations understand that to get around bottlenecks or create a better service experience requires thinking beyond the scope of their daily operations and the tools at their disposal. We are three leaders who have built careers by facilitating innovation in a medium-sized organization with a modest operating budget and a distinctively nonprofit operating model. Throughout our careers, we saw opportunities from problems, questioned assumptions, and challenged ourselves to think beyond the status quo—all without major financial investments or risking our core business. We would like to offer five strategies to build capacity for little innovations.

### **Five Steps to Little Innovations**

#### **Step 1: Wild Questions: Why Can't We?**

Innovation requires the courage to use imagination and ask wild questions like—what would you do if money was no limitation? What if half our staff or customers left tomorrow? How do we apply this cool idea to our organization? What if we re-imagine the basic assumptions of our business?

Wild questions help identify what we actually want or need to do and hone in on a specific problem by forcing us out of our comfort zone. Even the most effective, thoughtful leader gets caught in a way of seeing things and stops being able to see the forest through the trees or question at the level needed. It's more tempting to solve a problem in the middle where a pain point appears. A quick fix is easiest, most convenient, or

cheapest, but will it last, and does it address the root cause of the challenge? It's more difficult—but usually more effective, long term, to take a step back and examine the entire system. One of the best strategies leaders can demonstrate is the ability to ask questions that force team members to consider the bigger picture and question all parts of a system or process, not just those immediately apparent.

Questions don't always need to lead to hugely expensive, time-draining initiatives. In fact, it's probably taking the easy way out if a team always relies upon asking for more resources as prerequisites to the implementation of innovating thinking or vastly new and different ideas.

One of our institution's most successful recent innovations was born from a challenge presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. As college administrators of Lackawanna College, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, we oversee four culinary and hospitality-related majors that depend on students participating in our student-run restaurant. Students obtain industry-rich learning experiences while serving real customers in all operations of this live classroom. During the pandemic, the restaurant industry suffered immensely. Like restaurants all over the country, our local industry faced labor shortages, inflation, capacity limits, patrons' fear of eating indoors and many more pressing issues. Our leadership team recognized how vital experiential learning is to student success but wrestled with the thought of taking even one customer away from local establishments. Asking wild questions as a team had become such a strong muscle that we were able to access it in order to solve this major dilemma.

A myopic look at the immediate problem might have caused us to halt restaurant operations until local restaurants recovered. That alternative, however, did not look at the entire system or examine how we might best meet our long-term goals for the School of Hospitality: to work alongside students to better the communities within which we live, make meaningful connections with the industry, and set ourselves apart as a world class culinary education institution. We asked questions like: what if we could work WITH industry to solve this challenge? What resources do restaurants need?

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What resources would make our student experience, our guests' experience, better? What if we could open our student-run restaurant AND help local restaurants survive the pandemic? Those questions led us to an innovative solution that we named Rally for Restaurants.

Rally for Restaurants invited local restaurants into our live classrooms, allowing them to use our resources and giving them an off-site location for their unique concepts, free of charge. By asking wild questions we found a solution that looked beyond the immediate problem and led to high levels of collaboration with the industry that would employ our students. Through the exercise of asking wild questions our team examined the issue from the perspective of many stakeholders: students, industry, the City, the College, and our community to arrive at a solution.

## **Step 2: Practical Questions: How Can We?**

Once the wild questions lead to discussions and ideas, the next phase of the process involves asking “how CAN we...” After a team identifies the need to fix a bottleneck or incorporate a new initiative—only after deciding that the follow-up is an actual priority, not just a nice idea—leaders need to ask how to remove any barriers, how to test the concept, and how to run a pilot. Maybe the idea will be a colossal failure, and that's okay. Figuring out how to implement a solution and having the ability to test the outcomes is a success

and should be celebrated. Innovation requires drilling down into a problem until we get to a yes to pilot or test. Few organizations can afford to put all their eggs into one basket or get fully behind a project until results have been demonstrated on at least a small scale.

Leaders should advocate embracing an organizational culture of getting to yes for pilots. Think about how to break a big idea into its component parts and try it, taking care to create a timeline and assessment plan to figure out if the initiative is worth continuing or taking to a larger scale. If so, you've used the test to breed a successful innovation—just the result you were hoping for. If not, you've helped team members hone their thinking and strengthened your organizational culture of innovation. There is little downside to facilitating a “yes” response to pilot ideas that emerge from crazy questions.

Once the idea for Rally for Restaurants was born, the team had to ask: how can we pull this off? Our team went to work quickly to present the idea to our organization's full executive leadership team, get buy in from the City, deal with logistical permitting issues, etc. Rally became a synergistic partnership with the City, Lackawanna College, and other local businesses who wanted to see education continue and our local restaurant industry survive. The College had many resources industry needed: a labor force made up of students, ingredients that we purchased for students to execute food and beverage recipes, and a large dining room with an outdoor courtyard. Local restaurants supplied talented executive chefs, bartenders, and managers who took over nights of operations, taught students THEIR menus, and exposed students to top industry talent.

## **Step 3: Build a Team of Great Thinkers**

Building the right team is not easy nor permanent. Team members come and go, by design or by choice—and sometimes those gaps and resets are necessary and good. It is critical for the leader to know what important characteristics you seek and that the organization needs for and from your team members. Of course, you want everyone believing in the mission, but how do

they each live it? You want team members who are courageous enough to disagree or voice concerns, but are they toxic or constructively critical?

When building courageous, innovative teams, the formation of trust is vital. We have learned that we should never sacrifice trust building for even the most competent team member. Competence is a must, but are they too myopic or do they try to see the bigger picture? As a leader you want your team members to be able to handle issues in their own departments, but do they shield problems or do they have a way to process and talk through them effectively? How can you tell if the team members check their egos at the door and truly want what's best for the organization? Can you as a leader tolerate mistakes and commit to teaching and cultivate relationships for the long haul?

These are questions essential to building the right team for that moment in time. It is a leader's responsibility to hire for their weaknesses and to recognize that differences of opinion contribute to organizational strength. It's important that all members of a team have the opportunity to weigh in and vocalize their perspectives on matters of organizational or departmental importance, regardless of whether the decision is obviously part of their scope of authority. Sometimes consensus can't be reached, and a decision will have to be made by the person with the most authority. Still, the process of having the conversation and hearing everyone out is a critical piece and a step that shouldn't be short cut.

Without a trusting culture, innovation cannot flourish for long. Staff members need to feel empowered to make a mistake and know that their mistake will be tolerated, within reason. Cultivate and model behavior that recognizes mistakes as part of the learning process. If we perpetuate the status quo, we won't fail. We might keep inching along, and maybe things will get marginally better. If innovation starts with asking wild questions, we need people to feel free to ask questions that might sound silly or reveal ignorance. Leaders should be willing to own the wacky ideas that roll around in their brains without fear of judgment. Without a culture of trust and a genuine belief in each

other's brain power, free-flowing conversations can't happen.

The Rally initiative was born because our team had trust. We asked wild questions without fear and had no pride of ownership. We learned that ideas get better when all members touch them and that the first idea is rarely the best. We were literally building Rally as we were flying it.

#### **Step 4: Successful Failures**

Innovation implies risk and thinking outside of the comfort zone of regular operations. Leaders should explicitly empower their teams to fail and set the expectation that everyone learn from what didn't work as expected. Innovators need to think about what would be defined as a successful failure in their organization and how they would use knowledge gained to make a better outcome next time. Transparent discussions about what worked, what didn't, and what we need to do better are key hallmarks of fostering a culture of innovation. Too often, team members try to hide failures and/or explain them away with a surface level analysis. This might discourage others from taking risks and denies other team members the chance to learn from mistakes. As leaders, model the way. Share your failures and how they helped you pivot to the winning idea. By going first, leaders give team members permission to lead with courage and teach others this valuable skill. Failures are necessary aspects of the innovation journey and should be explicitly understood as part of the process.

Near the end of Rally, it occurred to us that we had possessed the physical resources to help more than one restaurant per evening of class. Our Culinary Complex is home to four separate workspaces: a bar, small commercial kitchen, large commercial kitchen, and bakery. We didn't think of inviting multiple restaurants in to work in socially distant spaces, which would have allowed us to increase impact on our local restaurant industry during the pandemic and would have given other classes exposure to more chefs and restaurateurs. We acknowledged this error in our team meetings and used the oversight to brainstorm an

annual multi-venue food and beverage festival we could host each year. We chose to chalk the failure up as a success not because we were proud of the oversight but because the lessons we learned led us to a great idea that could live on in our City once the pandemic subsided.

## Step 5: Follow Through

Innovation necessitates the responsibility to carry an idea through, a responsibility to build better, and to make lasting impacts. An idea itself isn't an innovation until a leader or team can make it come to life and create tangible outcomes. Organizational retreats have seen millions of world-changing ideas that died lonely deaths on a whiteboard. Bringing ideas to life is an incredibly important part of the innovative process. Determining the possible scale of a test, championing it, being willing to take risks for it, and prioritizing it—are all absolutely necessary part of innovation. If a team comes up with an initiative that addresses a wild question and decides to proceed, it should be important enough to rescue from that whiteboard of doom.

Rally for Restaurants was, in fact, born on a white board. Our team listed each stakeholder of culinary education at the top and outlined the resources each brought to the table. The pandemic's urgency gave us the impetus to follow through, but that won't always be true of great ideas. What we learned from this time in our history is that follow through will not always be demanded by external conditions, but we will always have the culture and the power to advocate for great ideas and to take risks to bring them to life.

## Conclusion

Successful innovation isn't easy, but at the same time, it's not as hard or overwhelming as it appears. The most famous innovators of our time are incredible and worth learning about because of how very much they changed our world. Those innovators, though, aren't the norm, and just because we don't reach their levels of fame or fortune doesn't mean little innovations don't have the capacity to change lives, organizations, and even industries. Our little innovation of Rally

for Restaurants achieved lasting impacts on our organization, our community, and our students. We helped each of the Rally participants stay open during COVID; we now have lasting, deep relationships with several members of our restaurant community; we earned the goodwill of City and civic leaders; and our students and faculty report stellar educational impacts of participating in this unique learning experience.

Think, question, pilot, and carry through, and impact will follow.

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*Dr. Jill Murray has positioned Lackawanna College as a leader in higher education. Since she took the role as the College's first female president in 2020, the College has been named as one of the World's Most Innovative Companies by Fast Company magazine in 2021, and the fastest growing college in its category by the Chronicle of Education, also in 2021. She has advocated improving higher education accessibility, tackled the rising cost of college with innovative and award-winning programs, and has been influential in launching regional education to business partnerships, experiential learning models, and expanded the College's national online learning presence. Learn more at: <https://www.lackawanna.edu/offices-and-departments/office-of-the-president/>.*





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