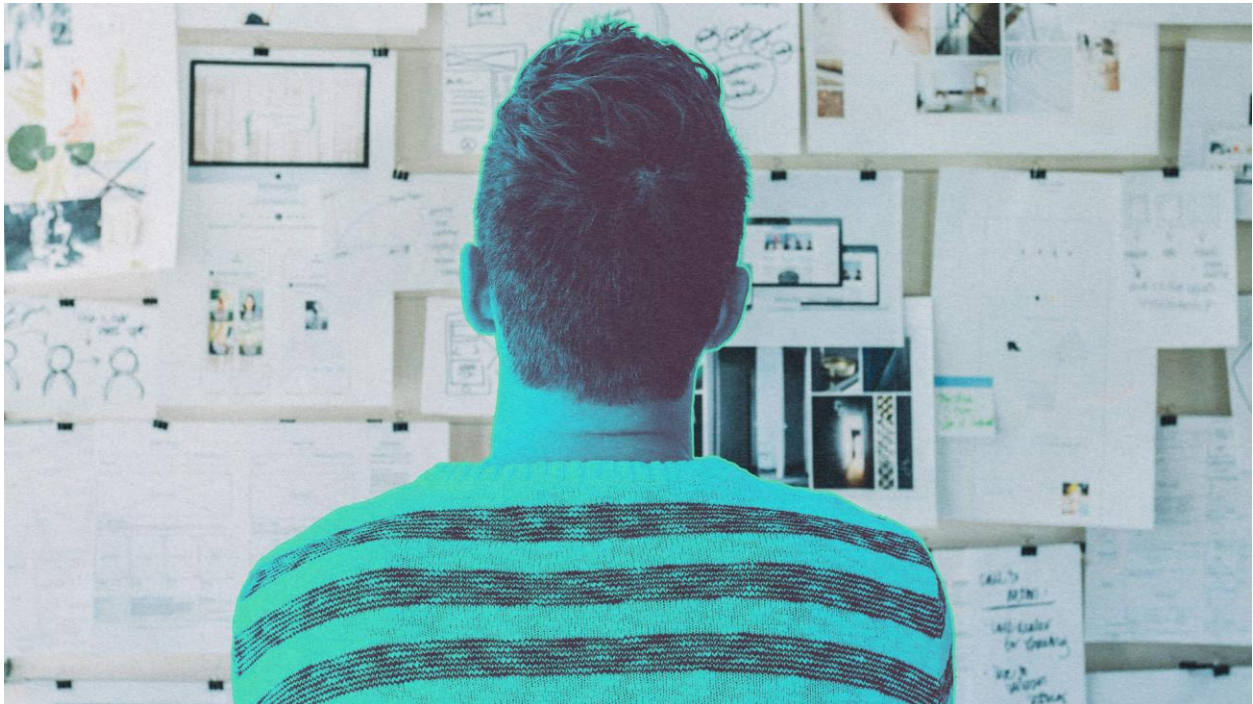


# 4 Ways Giving Employees More Freedom Sparks Innovation

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The best leaders find ways to create environments where employees can challenge the status quo, says this CEO.



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Innovation doesn't happen in environments bogged down by rigid rules, excessive oversight, or unnecessary bureaucracy. The most transformative ideas actually emerge when employees have the freedom to experiment, take risks, and truly own their work.

As a former executive at Oracle and the current CEO of the software company Incorta, I've seen firsthand that traditional leadership structures often do more to stifle innovation than foster it. Instead of relying on rigid processes, leaders should focus on creating an environment where employees feel empowered to challenge the status quo.

Here are four ways to cultivate that kind of workplace.

## 1. Hire for Capability—Then Focus on Outcomes

Too many leaders mistake constant oversight—like ensuring employees sit at their desks from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.—for productivity. In reality, great innovation comes from hiring smart, capable people and giving them room to solve problems in their own way. But hiring the right people is only part of the equation. Leaders must also focus on outcomes rather than rigid processes.

At many companies, leadership unintentionally slows progress by overcomplicating decision-making. Rather than trusting their employees, they create layers of approvals and bureaucratic processes that drain time and enthusiasm. When leaders micromanage, they create a culture of hesitation, and employees become afraid to make decisions, innovation slows, and morale suffers.

To build a culture of innovation, leaders must hire for capability and alignment with the company's vision, then trust their employees to make the right choices. Instead of dictating every step, set clear objectives and let talented professionals determine the best way forward. When employees feel ownership, they take more initiative, leading to increased creativity and efficiency. Shifting the focus from rigid rules to impact-driven work fosters an environment where people feel trusted and motivated to find the best solutions.

## **2. Give Interns the Hardest Problems**

One of the most surprising lessons I've learned is that our interns often come up with the most creative solutions. They're not burdened by outdated industry norms or ingrained ways of thinking, so they approach challenges with fresh perspectives.

We put this philosophy into practice at Incorta by assigning interns some of our toughest projects—like refining AI models with advanced tools and building interactive data visualizations to enhance our marketplace.

Time and again, they've exceeded expectations, offering insights that even senior team members might overlook. The key? Giving them the freedom to explore unconventional solutions. In contrast, companies that limit interns to low-stakes, mundane tasks miss out on a valuable source of innovation and enthusiasm.

## **3. Encourage 'Lazy' Thinking to Challenge Inefficiencies**

Some of the best innovations come from questioning the way things have always been done—and sometimes, from those looking for the easiest, most efficient way to get things done. I personally hate unnecessary steps. I don't want to stop at gas stations or sit in traffic for hours. So, I plan my day to eliminate inefficiencies, like living close to work, planning direct routes, and canceling unnecessary meetings. Small choices like these add up to more time for what really matters in my life, like engaging with customers and spending more time with my family.

The same thinking applies to business. Many organizations rely on outdated workflows that require extra steps, redundant approvals, and time-consuming processes. Some of the best problem-solvers are those who find ways to work smarter, not harder. I encourage my team to rethink how work gets done, whether it's streamlining data processes, cutting out unnecessary steps, or automating tedious tasks. This fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

Leaders should empower employees to identify bottlenecks and experiment with better approaches. Creating space for employees to rethink work ultimately leads to better decision-making, greater efficiency, and stronger business outcomes.

#### **4. Embrace Controlled Chaos**

True innovation doesn't happen in perfectly controlled environments. In fact, too much structure can kill creativity. Some leaders shy away from chaos, but I believe in structured freedom—providing clear goals without imposing unnecessary constraints.

Creativity thrives in environments that allow for experimentation, play, and improvisation. Companies like Apple have long embraced this ethos, recognizing that some of the best ideas emerge when people are given the space to explore without fear of failure. Apple's longstanding iterative design process, for example, allows for constant tinkering and refining, which has led to some of the most iconic products in tech history.

A great way to foster this kind of culture is to take a page from improv comedy. The "yes, and" principle—where participants build on each other's ideas rather than shutting them down—creates an environment where creativity flows freely. Play-based work environments lead to higher engagement and breakthrough thinking. Some of the most innovative teams operate with a sandbox mentality, where new ideas are tested, refined, and evolved without judgment.

Instead of fearing chaos, leaders should create an open forum for ideas, where employees feel free to test, iterate, and push boundaries without constant oversight. With clear goals and a culture that embraces exploration, teams will feel more confident taking bold steps toward meaningful innovation.

#### **The Freedom to Innovate**

At the end of the day, the companies that thrive are the ones that encourage curiosity, creativity, and calculated risk-taking. By giving employees more freedom, leaders tap into hidden potential and drive innovation in ways they never expected.

The world doesn't move forward by following the status quo. It moves forward because people are willing to challenge it. So, if you want to create a truly innovative workplace, start by loosening the reins and letting your people do what they do best—think, explore, and create.