How to build a high-trust, innovation-friendly environment

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In today’s economy, being able to innovate is one of the keys to success for individuals and companies. Sixty years ago, when there was just one Golder office located in Toronto, it was easy to walk down the hall to share ideas and build new solutions for the issues our clients were facing. But what does innovation look like in a company of several thousand people in hundreds of locations spread around the world?

It’s an obstacle that every organization – no matter the size – must tackle. How do you inspire collaboration between professionals with many different skill sets? Is it possible to encourage collaboration and mentoring in an ambitious and intellectually challenging field? When the possibility that an idea from one group might be exactly what is needed to solve a problem somewhere quite different, how can an organization break down barriers between disciplines?

**HOW TO EMBED INNOVATION IN AN ORGANIZATION**

If you want your team to innovate, you’ll need to do more than just ask for it. You’ll need to create an environment of trust where team members feel reassured that, if they express interest in taking a risk to develop a new technology, or use an existing technology in a new way, their ideas will be welcomed.

A high-trust, innovation-friendly environment requires the following elements:

- Communication, collaboration and coaching are the norm, not the exception.
- Barriers are removed, allowing cross-functional teams to create the best solutions.
- Individual creativity and performance are noticed and rewarded.

Doing this will give your employees agile careers where they are supported and respected. What’s more, they will have the latitude to adapt and grow within your organization, which generates satisfaction at every level, both personally and professionally.

**TECHNICAL COMMUNITIES ARE IMPORTANT FOR INNOVATION**

In our organization, we use the term “technical community” (TC) to describe a group of people who regularly communicate, share, and expand knowledge based on a common technical discipline or the service they provide. TC is equivalent to “community of practice,” a term introduced by Etienne Wenger in 1989 to describe a group of people who learn and develop through...
the process of sharing information and experiences. Communities of practice are the backbone of knowledge management.

Technical communities started early in our company’s history, originally on an informal basis in which colleagues shared knowledge and supported each other. In the past, these communities connected via meetings and conference calls; now, the collaboration exists on our company intranet and via other online venues. They have since grown into a key part of how we share knowledge, collaborate, coach and develop new services and technologies.

Communities are centered around a discipline (e.g., rock engineering, groundwater modelling), which focuses the conversation and collaboration around a shared interest and expertise. They provide the infrastructure to connect practitioners worldwide and allow them to share, store, retrieve and repurpose knowledge, which supports the organization’s technical excellence. This ultimately helps the team deliver the best solution to a client, no matter where they’re located.

In addition, TCs provide a venue for building standard protocols and best practices, creating consistent approaches to client problems and encouraging career development. As part of an employee engagement and leadership development initiative, being an active technical community member means more opportunities to connect with fellow practitioners worldwide, access mentors in their field of practice, explore new areas of expertise, collaborate on presentations, access training opportunities, and learn of opportunities within the company.

As a member and mentor, I have seen the power of a global technical community. Tapping into a TC to put together a distributed project team or identifying subject-matter experts to deliver a technical review of a highly complex project is an ideal use of these groups. One of my favorite examples is seeing a member post a question and watching the responses follow global time zones as colleagues from around the world weigh in on an issue.

When hydrogeologist Matthew K. Wickham posed a question about a challenging remediation project to his technical community’s email list, he received 12 thoughtful responses within 24 hours. “I have been with Golder just over a year now and am truly impressed with our technical capabilities and experience and how easy it is to access such,” says Wickham.

**HOW ACCESS TO RESEARCH SUPPORTS INNOVATION**

In a climate that supports innovation, it is also important to imagine oneself in the position of an employee who is ambitious and wants to solve a client’s problem or develop a new approach to an old issue. Think of the questions that your employee might ask, such as:

- Is there someone with relevant experience who can help me?
- What external resources can help?
- Does the company have access to recorded webinars, videos, wikis, published papers or other documents on this topic?
- Who can help me get access to more research?

Once you’ve gathered the most common questions, find out what existing resources your organization has, develop ways to make them findable, and make sure that employees know how to locate the information they need. Whether it’s a webinar or a wiki, if your team can’t find it, it’s worthless.

Ensuring that your team has access to the best resources can be challenging, and we’ve found that this process is best supported by a team that is focused on knowledge management. This team includes reference and research specialists and provides literature search, document acquisition, copyright guidance and training, and is focused on delivering resources and saving time for our subject-matter experts, so they can focus their energy on the science.

**BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS BETWEEN DISCIPLINES**

While technical communities provide a space for colleagues within similar disciplines to collaborate, there is also a need to facilitate cross-specialty collaboration. With that, we’ve found that breaking down barriers between disciplines is best done face-to-face. One approach that we’ve implemented is an annual multi-day, internal-only event, at which hundreds of researchers from around the world present their work to their colleagues. We call this the Golder Technical Excellence Conference or GTEC.

Much of the success of these gatherings comes via networking, the informal conversations and collaborative projects that develop among attendees. My colleague Nicole DeNovio, a GTEC attendee and technical community leader for our groundwater modelling community, stressed the importance of building meaningful relationships across TCs, noting that there is an opportunity for more networking. DeNovio commented: “I find the more we talk to each other, the more ideas are generated.”

Fostering this cooperative environment and planning these events requires a commitment of time and money. Plus, having the firm’s senior leaders present and expressing their support is an important factor in encouraging employees to invest their time and professional credibility in innovation.

Denis Cutter, the leader of our information management technical community, said: “Everyone in the room spoke to the commitment of Golder as the board, CEO and COO were all participating. Their presence supported the statement that ‘we want all of you specialists to be doing this, and we’re going to support you and we’ll figure it out together.’”

**RISING TO THE CHALLENGE**

In addition to a collaborative community and access to resources and research, a company seeking ground-breaking thought work must be ready to commit funding and support to the ideas that employees bring forward. To do this, there must be a well-thought-through initiative to encourage innovation. For us, we implemented a Golder innovation program that helps convert an idea into a good or service to create value that meets a client need.

An innovation program should be aimed at supporting innovation in all its forms, from breakthrough technologies to incremental improvements to existing services provided...
to clients. Ideas and breakthroughs can be developed within the company or through partnerships with industry, academia and clients. In addition, it is important for any organization considering changes to, or starting, an innovation program to consider the business case for each proposed idea. For example, our criteria in determining the business case are:
- Alignment with business strategy.
- Strengths/merits of the innovation.
- Project team expertise/experience.
- A clear plan for achieving the technical goals.
- Value for money, considering both financial and non-financial benefits.
- Sustainability and corporate social responsibility components.

The innovation program is supported by a process that consists of several gates or decision points. In our case, the process starts with a proponent, either an individual or a team, describing the business case for an innovation project. Prior to developing the business case, proponents are encouraged to reach out to colleagues in their technical communities to share their idea and get recommendations on how it might be improved. The individual or team is also supported by the knowledge management and library and information services team.

We find that including more people in the innovation discussion can deliver significant benefits, from improving the strategic alignment to accessing fresh ideas and critical talent. Technical communities serve as “incubators” to test preconceptions and introduce cross-disciplinary fertilization to generate radically new ideas. Once the idea is ready, the innovation proposal is routed to one or more technical communities best suited to assess its technical and business merits.

The TC can also help identify areas where a submission might be strengthened. TCs then forward innovation proposals with a strong business case to a global selection committee, which includes our CEO and other key leaders, for final review and approval.

Once an innovation project is funded, progress is regularly reviewed by the sponsoring TC and the global selection committee. These reviews are used to nurture, manage and measure the progress of the projects. Innovation projects are often highlighted at the GTEC conference in special sessions. They include panel discussions on the process of preparing and garnering approval for an innovation proposal and highlights of each of the approved and funded projects.

Sixteen years ago, when the National Academy of Engineering developed a vision for our work in "The Engineer of 2020: Visions of Engineering in the New Century," they concluded that "creativity (invention, innovation, thinking outside the box, art) is an indispensable quality for engineering, and given the growing scope of the challenges ahead and the complexity and diversity of the technologies of the 21st century, creativity will grow in importance."

As the future brings our industry new challenges, it is our responsibility as leaders to find ways to embolden our employees, enabling them to develop and deliver the next great idea or breakthrough.

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