

Some companies are well-organized for innovation. Consider Apple, 3M, P&G, Sony, Samsung, Starbucks and many others. Consider that 3M manages 38 core technologies and has placed 50,000 products and 2,000 brands on the market. So the question becomes: How can an organization become more innovative? How can it search more systematically for new ideas? How can it convert new ideas into more successful launches? Most companies carry out innovation using a stage-gate method: idea screening, concept development and testing, marketing strategy development, business analysis, product development, market testing and commercialization. Often control of the project moves from one group to another such that the end result rarely matches the initial idea. The reason that innovation must be achieved through processes and independent projects is the natural consequence of this contradictory dual objective: to remain efficient at the same time as we're thinking about changing what works today. For someone to change the way they work today, they must stop doing what they are doing, step back, think, rethink assumptions, compare and look into how other organizations work, think of new possibilities, assess them, design them, refine them and test them, and finally to extend them to the rest of the organization as a task that then can and must be adopted as a standard and accepted as a new routine. In the best practices of the world's most innovative companies, the people assigned to perform a particular innovation-related task are removed, in whole or part, from day-to-day operations. The fact that innovation projects are achieved through processes has forced the experts to investigate what such processes should look like. A process is a set of sequenced tasks over time. This has led to the conclusion that in order to innovate we need a project to move through a number of stages. Writers vary in the number of stages they prescribe. Winning at Innovation takes a much more collaborative view of the innovation process. We think more about teams and roles rather than stages. Our view is that, in reality, the stages or phases of an innovation process must be the result of the interaction of those involved in the innovation processes. Certainly, each innovation, depending on the

goals and nature of the project, will require its own ad hoc process and sequence. The stages to follow to upgrade a motor are completely different from the stages to follow to improve the quality of a fabric, for instance. The main idea behind our book is this: the phases or stages of an innovation process cannot be predetermined, but must emerge as a result of the interaction of a set of functions or roles performed by certain individuals. As a result, instead of having a process that certain people should follow, we have a group of people who, out of their spontaneous interaction and needs throughout the project, design a process. In other words, in the traditional innovation processes the stages or phases determine the people we are going to need. In the approach we propose here, the roles come first and the innovation process is a result of interaction among these roles. We believe this approach is more appropriate because, as we have explained, innovation processes can barely be parameterized. Creativity requires analogical, not sequential thinking, and so does innovation, which is nothing but creativity applied to a particular discipline. Innovation requires a lot of “coming and going,” returning to the same idea, dismissing it, taking it up again, revising it, looking for more information, designing, realizing that that design is not optimal and that we need to go back to the drawing board. Innovation is not a linear process, rather it is a process that advances, but with much backtracking and detouring.

Thus, the A-to-F model we introduce here is not an innovation process, but the list of the key roles we have found to exist in the companies that have shown the best innovation practices in recent years. Our proposal is that if a company wants to innovate, it must define and assign these roles to specific individuals and then, having established goals, resources and deadline, let them interact freely to create their own process. The roles we identified are: (A) **ACTIVATORS**: These are the people who will initiate the innovation process, without worrying about stages or phases. Essentially, their mission is to initiate the process. (B) **BROWSERS**: These are the experts in searching for information. Their task is not to produce anything new, but to supply the

group with information. Their mission is to investigate throughout the process and to find the information relevant both to the start of the process and to the application of new ideas. (C) CREATORS: The people who produce ideas for the rest of the group. Their function is to ideate new concepts and possibilities, and search for new solutions at any point in the process. (D) DEVELOPERS: People specialized in turning ideas into products and services; they are the ones who “tangibilize” ideas, who give form to concepts and develop a rough marketing plan. Creators come up with ideas; developers invent things. Their function is to take ideas and turn them into solutions. In short, to invent. (E) EXECUTORS: The people who take care of everything to do with implementation and execution. Their function is to implement, that is, bring the innovation under development to the organization and to the market. (F) FACILITATORS: Those who approve the new spending items and investment needed as the innovation process moves forward. They also manage the process to prevent it getting stuck. Their mission is the instrumentation of the innovation process. The innovation process will take shape based on the interaction among all these roles. Some people might think the A-to-F model is much the same as the traditional, well-worn stages of the innovation process, where the definition of objectives is associated with activation, research with information browsing, the generation of ideas with creativity, assessment with financing, and development and launch are equivalent to what in our model the developers and executors would do. Where, then, are the differences and what is the added value of our model? Operating by roles, we go from “this stage is my baby” to “these stages belong to all of us, so let’s see how each role can give them some added value.” Thus you get everybody involved throughout the innovation process. Naturally, this can be achieved simply by designating dedicated teams. But if the dedicated team is also structured on the A-to-F roles, that will ensure that the key functions of a process of stages are represented in a process without stages. Stage-based processes tend to be quite rigid. The fact that the stages are a result of group dynamics among six types of roles leads to a natural and spontaneous flexibility, freeing those

responsible for the innovation process from having to stick to a prescribed script and from feeling that when they move forward and backward in the process they are acting inefficiently or simply abandoning a stage-based method whose inflexibility makes it hard to follow. By saying goodbye to the rigidity of stages and letting the process flow as a result of group dynamics, this sequence does not occur linearly, but rather can go forward and backward as often as needed. The flexibility of the model and we argue that the natural sequence: A–B–C–D–E(F) could change to: A–B–C–A–F–D–B–D–F–E–C–E Or to something as simple and brief as: A–D–E Finally, although the dynamics of the roles themselves determines the process, we recommend having someone who oversees the entire series of roles, from A to F, a sort of project manager. His or her function, perhaps different from those in other, more controlled processes, would be to intervene at critical moments when the group dynamics, rather than adding value, are hindering the progress of the process.

*Source: A-to-F Method for Innovation Success*