

Mind of an Innovator

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Abstract: When we want to think big, take risks, and act quickly, why does it drive communication to awkward fumbling and cause intellectual wallflower-ing? Why is innovation restricted to the zany Google-phile or the garage-tinkering stargazer? What if everyone could have the mind of an innovator? What if we could get there together? Innovation is best played with others. It should be an engaging and collaborative exploration into what could be, propelling minds forward. Games are a great way to get some collaborative engagement, so we created a game that rewards recognizing and doing key innovation behaviors. It is a game that you can play while you are working on the innovation itself. It is *Mind of an Innovator*.

A Game of Innovation

Imagine there was a game being played in your organization. Everyone was a player, and the game was integrated into your daily work. In order to succeed in the game, you needed to pay attention to specific things other players said or did. And when they did or said these things, your goal was to be the first to recognize them with a tangible item, a reward. You, yourself, are also being paid attention to by the other players and are being rewarded for displaying these very same behaviors. So, success in this game occurs when you both, perform these behaviors at a high level, as well as, recognize these behaviors being performed by others to a high degree — both behavior performance and behavior identification have an extremely high value towards behavior integration and ultimately changing ones mindset towards that of innovation.

In our *Mind of an Innovator* game, the behaviors that are rewarded relate to those foundational innovation behaviors found in *The Innovator's DNA* (2015). One of these foundational behavior, divergent thinking — a key element of innovation — requires keeping an open mind, exploring possibilities, and seeking deeper understanding. When are you looking for new solutions to persistent problems, or you are looking for solutions in unfamiliar territory, an innovator's mindset will serve you well. Getting into such a mindset requires a shifting of gears from the usual focus on work efficiency and productivity. This systemic promotion of behavior change and mindset change requires a little extra to increase an organizations motivation and engagement in the changes. This is where the game comes into play.

On Fertile Ground

Our innovation center offers workshops and trainings to develop innovation. Participants are introduced to these key concepts, and engaging in experiential activities that put the concepts into practice. At the end of the workshop or training, most everyone is enthusiastic and eager to apply these innovation practices to their everyday work. Unfortunately, once these people return to the daily grind they find themselves swept up in the inertia of the standard practice, and all of those wonderful innovation habits fade to the background. How do we help participants go from "knowing" innovation habits to "being" innovators? We decided to make a game of it.

Our plan is to test *Mind of an Innovator* in the workshops and trainings offered through our innovation center, with the goal of expanding this game to any meeting within the organization. We started testing this game, and in the tests we observed a few things. We need to start smaller. Five tokens are too many for participants to keep track of. Early on the game needs to be highly structured. It takes longer to get rolling because you are asking participants to do two things at once: the task at hand and play the game. The goal is to integrate the game into the task at hand. Innovation mindset is a switching of gears, and warming people up for the game helps them switch gears.

The Beginnings of the Game Design

The design began with identifying five key innovation behaviors that support divergent thinking, big ideas, and the boundaries of what is possible. We assigned each of the behaviors a token. These tokens are different colored cones and discs, which are pieces from the board game, Talisman (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Cones and tokens, from the game Talisman, used in early versions of the game.

The “Yes, and…” token is awarded when someone shares an idea with you, and you affirm the idea while also expanding the idea further. Imagine you are in a group is discussing how to improve engagement in a basic online class. So when someone shares the idea to have learning in the class rotate leading the lesson, you respond Yes, and it could be on any topic the students want as long as they can related it to the class someone in the group would give you a “Yes, and…” token.

The “???” token is awarded when someone poses an excellent, open-ended question. When you are discussing how to improve engagement, and someone asks What do we know about the most engaged students in the class? and you think that is an excellent question, you can award them a “???” token.

The “Openness” token is awards when a person is receptive to ideas. So in the flurry of ideas flying during this brainstorm of how to increase engagement you notice someone who is nodding and affirming basically everything coming down the pipe, you would award them one of your “Openness” tokens.

The “Deep Space” token is given to a person who presents an off-the-wall-out-of-the-box idea that gets people thinking in a new direction. Like when someone suggests We could offer virtual pony rides to our students during class, someone in the group can offer a “Deep Space” token for that truly original idea.

The “But Kicker” token is given when a person turns around your closed thinking. So when a person in the group suggests that you send engaged learners coupons for ice cream, and your response is “But lactose intolerant learner wouldn’t want that,” and then another person says “Let’s kick that but aside because we’re exploring all the options,” that person kicked your “but…” and you should give them one of you “But Kicker” tokens.

Players are given a few of each type of token at the start of the game, and these are the tokens you give away to other players when you observe them being innovative. One goal of the game is to give away as many of your tokens as you can. You are also trying to earn tokens by other player by demonstrating innovative behaviors, and the second goal of the game is to accumulate as many tokens as possible. You keep your token to give and your tokens received separate.

You can tally up at the end of the meeting. At the end of the meeting the group can tally up tokens given and received. Badges are awarded for most tokens given, most overall tokens received, and most tokens received in any one of the five token categories.

Prototyping and Experimenting

Our test groups are comprised of teams of folks that are going through an innovation-training workshop or an innovation design session. In most cases the test participants had little or no background information about *Mind of an Innovator* until the introduction of the activity within the workshop. Our insights came from direct observation and general “how’d it go?” questions after the test sessions were completed.

Test #1

Our first test group was a small IT group (5 people) in a session designing a hackathon. We limited it to 3 categories: yes, and; the questioner; and the deep space idea. This is a group that knows each other and has been working together often on this design and project and are relatively familiar with innovation. What we observed was a couple of enthusiastic early adopters who were helpful at engaging other members of the team. They definitely favored the “yes and…” tokens, as it seemed the most intuitive category; the easiest to recognize or identify. No score tracking, just wanted to see if they were using it and engaging with the concept.

Test #2

The next test group consisted of members of an innovation training workshop (11 people) who had one previous meeting together, but otherwise did not know each other. They used the same tokens as the previous test, but were in a different atmosphere than the previous test. They took longer to warm up, but utilized all three categories more broadly. Participants provided feedback: enjoyed the game, wanted to keep score to know who won.

Insights

After these tests, we confirmed that the categories were resonating, particularly the “Yes, and...”. But we wanted to make it easier to track what tokens were for which category, and track progress of giving and receiving.

Test #3, Part A

The third test was an unexpected screw up. For an innovation workshop that contained a mostly intact team (know each other) of 12 participants, we mistakenly left the Talisman game at home (after suffering a crushing defeat at the hand of a child), so we improvised by using colored index cards in replace of the tokens. Fortunately, the test group not only participated in the game, but also were the most enthusiastically engaged group to date. The exchange of cards (slapping them down like in the card game Slap Jack) started early and was a vital part of the activity until the session ended.

Test #3, Part B

We tested the game with the same group a week later, this time testing colored poker chips as tokens. We observed, despite our hopeful assumptions, they appeared less enthusiastic about the game. Following the session we spoke with some of the team members. We found they preferred the crude cards, enjoying having a deck and the physical aspect of the slapping down the cards made for a more engaging game play, and suggested/asked to write the categories on the cards.

Insights

We then took this feedback and begin to design cards, identifying engaging, funny, associative images and descriptions relating to each of the card categories. For the next test, we only had 4 cards as we were still working on the 5th at the time. At this point, the 5 categories are: “Yes, and...”, “Openness”, “Out There” (revised from “Deep Space”), the “Inquisitor” (revised from “???”), and the “But Kicker”.

Test #4

We had a new test group going through the innovation workshop series, and we test with the 4 cards. Smaller group (4 members) with some familiarity with each other (acquainted). They liked the cards, but it took them longer than the other groups to warm up to using them, and they struggled with keeping track of the categories. We provided a crude homemade tracking sheet (2 areas, given and received), but this still gave them trouble tracking.

Insights

We better understood the problem the players had with keeping track of their cards and their score of given and received. We met to design a point tracking system and came up with 2 versions to test, a game board and a travel version.

Test #5

The game board was tested with the same group mentioned above. We found they were still slow to warm up, the challenge being a small group size. Considering setting a minimum number of players for the game. Planning on doing a “I do, We do, You do” introduction method.

Test #6

Next game board test is with a new innovation workshop (7 participants) of a team that knows each other. For this test, we kept things basically the same to see if we would get similar results as test group #5.

Insights

We realized that even with the “I do, We do, You do” introduction, we still did not get the level of engagement from groups that we were hoping for. Groups were still focusing on the actual activities of the workshop and neglected to readily exchange cards as part of the game, even with the demo.

Test #7 (Travel Version)

The travel version (aka bar game) was meant to be mobile and not sitting, and having networking/sharing type conversation. We wanted to track progress (recognizing and performing behaviors). We developed a rules card that explained the steps to play, participants (N=15) were assigned a number that they would track on the back of their card as they gave them away, to understand how they received and gave away the cards. Points were given

based on each of those actions.

Insights

Board game test results: Players liked the concept, and liked the categories. Teams that had a dynamic player or some direct coaching had a more vibrant game. Other teams the game became an afterthought. Tried more onboarding, more detailed examples, but the result was the same.

Travel version test results: People loved the concepts. People liked the categories of the cards.

Similar to other test sessions, there was too much overhead with the activities and the game fell to the wayside. Categories were not adhered to because players were busy talking and sharing ideas. The game was an afterthought.

Test #8

Tried to simplify by removing the different categories and replacing them with a single, generic Innovation card. The test group was going through the innovation workshop series. This was a smaller group (7 members COPS and co-author, Justin Lee) with some familiarity with each other (acquainted), and included two offsite participants.

Insights

We noticed less confusion, but still did not generate the level of engagement we wanted.

We decided to add another dimension – make the topic of conversation fun and low-risk (not relevant to daily life). Similar to *Apple to Apples* and *Cards Against Humanity*, we came up with Problem Cards (running the gambit from whimsical to mundane) and Thing Cards (again, random things). Players take turns drawing one Problem card and two Thing cards (see Figure 2). The players use this as the innovation content to which they apply the innovation behaviors on the cards.



Figure 2: Example set of Problem and Thing cards (left), and example game board (right).

Test #9

First test group (3 people) showed high engagement. There was 25 minutes of play.

Insights

We noticed immediate improved engagement when we added this new dimension. The addition of Problems and Things made it funny and interesting. The players traded innovation cards in all five categories, but had suggested changes for the "But Kicker" and "Openness" cards. The players were easily riffing off of each other's ideas, and no one negated another player's idea, deeming them almost useless. The test group suggested adding in a card that introduced an artificial "But..." The "Openness" card was too...open. The players suggested changing it to "Affirmation".



Figure 3: A group of players enjoying their time playing the game.

Test #10

We expanded to a larger test group (21 people) for a longer time (40 minutes of player) with similarly high levels of engagement. We did NOT make any of the suggested changes from test group #9 because we wanted to see if this larger group would affirm #9's suggestions. With this larger group we introduced mixing up the groups from time to time.

Insights

They did confirm #9's suggestions! We saw the same level of high engagement (see Figure 3), the desire to replace "Openness" with a card of general affirmation, and the "But Kicker" going essentially unused. Participants reported that they felt more comfortable with the innovative behaviors after the game was played, and felt this would be an excellent activity to play before the start of a meeting.

Test #11

An innovation workshop group (9 people) played as a warm-up activity to kick off their meeting.

Insights

The groups were a little slow to start. We figured a practice round of the game involving the entire group would be helpful for participants to get a feel for the game.

Test #12

Member of the previous large group test reached out asking if we could host a gameplay session for his team to work on and build innovative behaviors. For this group we are incorporating the new "But Bomb" card which a player can use to create an barrier to the innovation with a creative constraint, an affirmation card named "Good Neighbor" which a player can simply "thumbs up" another player's idea (see Figure 4), and a whole-group warm-up round of play to start off. After a handful of rounds of gameplay, we began to relate these innovation behaviors they have been "playing" with to their daily life, by having them suggest real Problems that their team works to solve, playing a couple rounds. After that, we had the teams suggest actual resources and characteristics of their teams that they would use to replace the Things in the game. In this way, we begin to make a full transition to relevant problems and real resources for the players.

Insights

We still see a need for a better introduction to the game play, but we are seeing incremental improvement with

the use of the “I do, We do, You do” method. Participants felt that the transition from the abstract Problems and Things to real Problems and Things (resources) had resonating value to them. The “But Bombs” were too vague and difficult (relied on players coming up with a constraint themselves), so we plan to create mildly generic “Buts” for each Problem to enable the game play to go more smoothly.



Figure 4: An example set of the most recent deck of cards.

Challenges... or Opportunities? Where do we go from here?

The next areas that we want to focus on are: making the transition from theoretical to practical application; game introduction and how-to-play; delivery of the game via an online platform.

We will continue to explore ways to transition the *Mind of an Innovator* experience from recognizing and demonstrating innovative behaviors around abstract, random problems to demonstrating these behaviors with problems and resources that are real for the players.

We will be experimenting with scripting a more official introduction (possibly record a video of it) to the game play specifically for use in introducing the concepts and how to play. By documenting the introduction, we can begin to test it out with different audiences in a more standardized way while integrating feedback after each time.

We are trying to figure out a component for online participation because we have a significant number of remote employees in the organization, who usually connect with other through either audio or video conferencing. We see potential in expanding beyond innovation to other skills (leadership, change management, etc.), and to track and display badges in some sort of forum.

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