Culture
matters

The IT executive's guide
## to building open teams

Red Hat

From the pages of *Organize for Innovation*
by Jim Whitehurst

Senior Advisor and former President, IBM, and former President and CEO, Red Hat
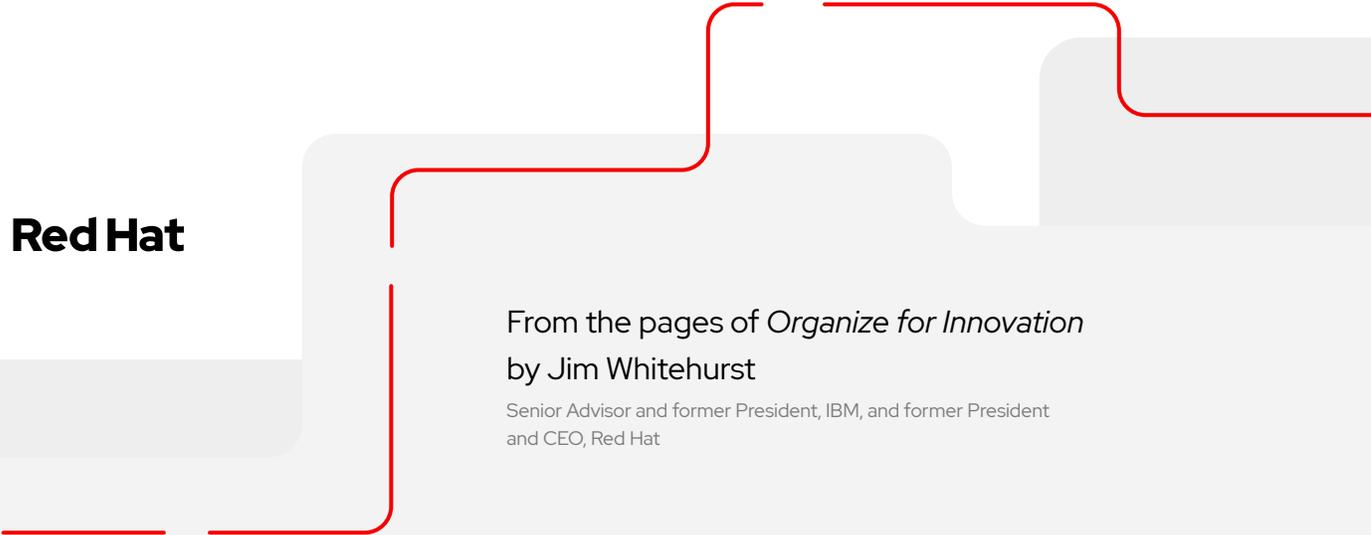
The open leadership mindset
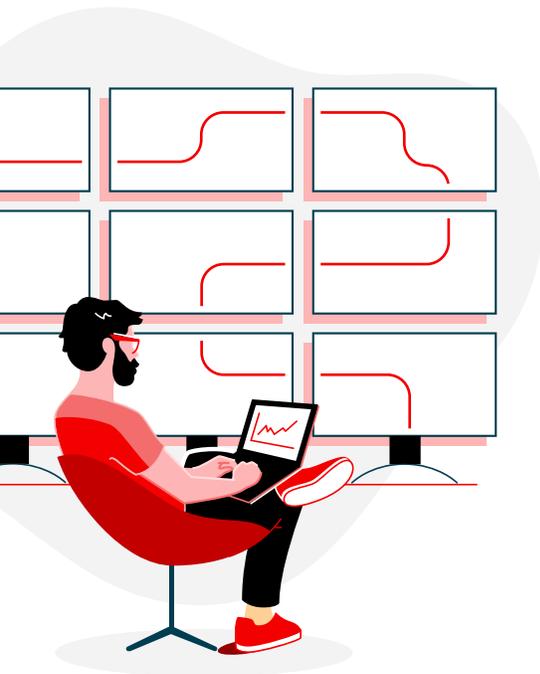
In the wake of global changes, organizations are realizing why the ability to adapt and innovate is critical to their survival. But like a market disruption, innovation is unpredictable, something no one can adequately control—let alone plan for. So leaders are wondering: how can someone build creative, responsive organizations without prescribing every outcome, dictating every action, or planning for every contingency?

The answer, leaders have found, is organizational culture.

"Organizational culture" is more than workplace perks. It's the result of a shared set of values, priorities, and perspectives that provide sufficient context and keep teams connected. Leading an innovative organization means building the kind of culture that will help an organization thrive during even the most turbulent times (not just installing new ping pong tables in the break room).

That's why leaders are rethinking how they lead—how they inspire others, set direction, and respond to feedback. They must ensure they're weaving values, principles, and norms into the fabric of their organizations so they can help people remain unified in the face of disruption.

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Today's IT leaders need to be culturally competent as much as they are technically competent.

Mike Kelly
*The Open Organization Guide to IT Culture Change*[1]

Download "IT Leadership in the Next Normal," a Harvard Business Review Analytic Services report that reveals CIOs' top priorities.

Download the report

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[1] Kelly, Mike, et al. *The Open Organization Guide to IT Culture Change.* Red Hat Inc., 2017.

And leaders are letting open principles guide their work.

Being a leader in an open organization means making connections: linking people to each other and to a larger, shared vision. It means reconsidering your view of failure and cultivating a sense of ownership across the organization. It means being transparent—about the issues you face, the worries you carry, and the limits you possess. In short, it means creating the context others need to do their best work.

Some leaders believe that extending trust and working this way will somehow diminish their power. In reality, leaders should be sharing as much as they can with their organizations. Sharing information is how leaders begin to build the context that teams need to forge connections between their passions and the organization's mission.

Learn how to create a culture of innovation in your organization. Download the e-book "The open organization guide to IT culture change".

Download the e-book
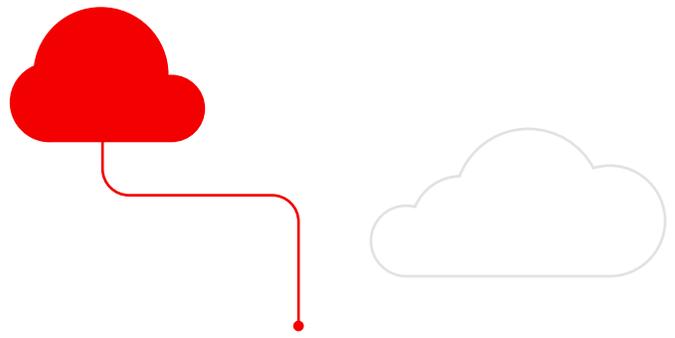
97%

of global execs say transformation success will grow in importance in their industry in 2021[2]

Building that context is critical work. According to the third-annual digital transformation survey by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 97% of global executives surveyed say transformation success will grow in importance as a competitive factor in their industry in 2021 and beyond. Eighty-nine percent recognize that the pandemic has underscored why the right organizational culture is important for digital transformation.[2]

But the nature of work is changing. That means the factors keeping people invested in and motivated by that work are changing, too. Employees who feel like they have a real, personal stake in the success or failure of a project are going to funnel more energy into it.

Clearly, our conventional strategies for cultivating engagement may no longer work—and now is the time to reconsider our approach.

[2] Harvard Business Review Pulse Survey, sponsored by Red Hat. "Accelerating Transformation for a Post-Covid-19 World." 2021.

Be a catalyst, not a commander

Leaders of conventional organizations are commanders: they dictate and prescribe both means and ends, then monitor people to make sure they use the former to achieve the latter. Leaders of open organizations are catalysts. Here's how:

Be an agent of change.

Being a conventional leader means constantly being tempted to step in, to force decisions, to command. Catalysts, on the other hand, believe that if they get the right conversations going—if they spark the right kinds of collaboration—then their organizations will realize better results.

Step aside.

Great leaders give people enough structure to know they're going in the right direction, but those leaders don't want to prescribe a single path. They need the people making the journey to feel empowered to control that journey.

Prioritize connection.

As an open leader, being a catalyst is actually more difficult than being a commander. Far from dictating, they need to master the art of making connections that combine the right people and ideas at the right time to ignite the most influential innovations.
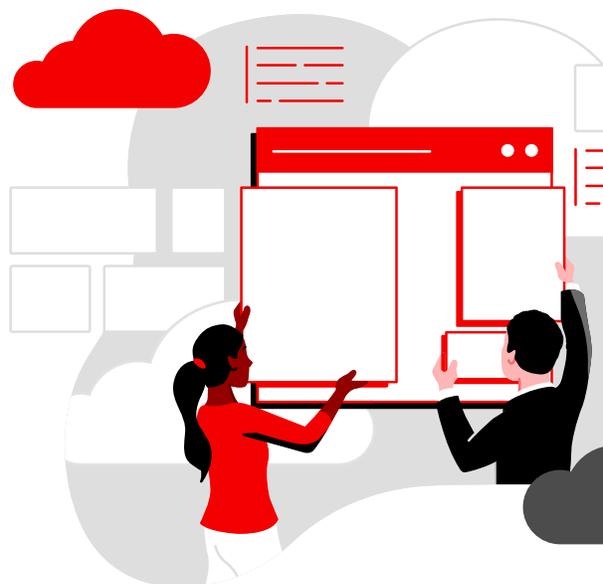
Open leadership is a juggling act: leaders are constantly balancing the skills, personalities, and cultural capital they see in their colleagues.

Leaders become catalysts when they let go of the assumption that they alone know best. It's a collaborative effort—one well worth the organizational rewards.

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Deciding to share (and determining how to share) drives open leaders to an important conclusion: a group is always going to produce a better solution than an individual.

Jim Whitehurst
Organize for Innovation[3]

Hear what experts have to say about open leadership enablement in a series of webinars.

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The open leader checklist

Being an open leader requires:

☑ **Willingness**
to extend trust and share information.

☑ **Appreciation**
for transparency and collaboration whenever possible.

☑ **Sensitivity**
to the moods, emotions, and passions of the people that make up an organization.

☑ **Knowledge**
of not only what to share, but also how to share it.

☑ **Belief**
that groups will consistently outperform individuals working in isolation.

☑ **Trust**
in those groups to lead the necessary change.

[3] Whitehurst, Jim. *Organize for Innovation*, Red Hat, 2021.

Create culture with clarity

Open leaders model the behaviors they want to see from others, then empower their teams to act in ways they know will best benefit the organization. Rather than dictate, open leaders gather appropriate data ahead of big decisions to establish context for their teammates. With clarity of purpose, people can apply their own creativity and initiative to help the organization accomplish its goals. Here's how:

Create a culture where goals are obvious and transparent.

Record them publicly, track them, and reconnect with them repeatedly. This way, everyone will know the group's collective goals, and they will be more likely to work with the same intentions.

Assume positive intent.

This approach requires trust and a strong instinct that people and teams are doing the best they can with the data, resources, and perspective they have. Let staff prove their intentions to you—positive or negative—rather than assuming the worst.

> Motivations are invisible. Actions, on the other hand, are very visible. The way we connect the two is important.
>
> **Jim Whitehurst**
> *Organize for Innovation*[3]

³ Whitehurst, Jim. *Organize for Innovation*, Red Hat, 2021.

Practice patience.

Before jumping to conclusions about intent, consider their frames of reference. Do they share the same context you do? And do you understand everything they do? Sometimes, others simply don't see what you see: something that's a big deal to you might not be to someone else. Take the time to initiate a conversation and align your priorities.

Organization

Career best

Talent

Passion

By acting the way they expect others to act, open leaders create transparent and trustful organizational cultures where collaboration comes easily. Open leaders build spaces where people feel connected and motivated and where they care deeply about the work they do. That intersection between the organization's needs, a person's talents, and individual passions is where people can do their best work, allowing transformation to occur.

Red Hat uses the Organization Passion Talent model internally for coaching, development, and planning.

Access articles and resources about open leadership and management.

Read the articles
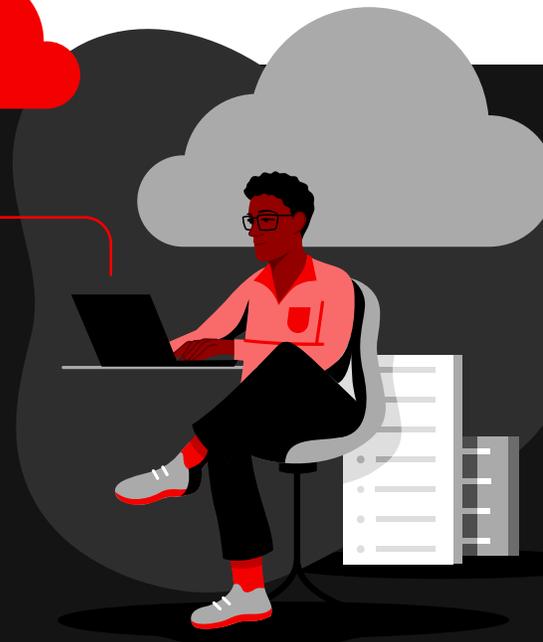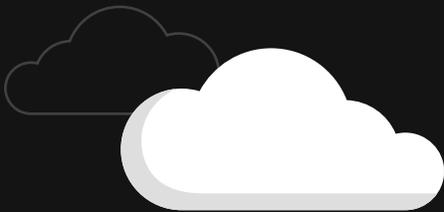
Breaking
old habits

Designing an innovative culture in any organization means balancing the novelty of fresh ideas with the valuable wisdom the organization's leaders have gained over time. It's always a work in progress. But regularly evaluating how an organization responds to the merit of new ideas is crucial for producing the best results.

Understanding what needs to change is only part of the process.

Open leaders understand that implementing and sustaining change often involves breaking deeply ingrained habits, making difficult decisions, facing painful truths, and reflecting on goals and commitment. Here's how:

Engage more, dictate less.

Innovation today requires leaders to be willing and able to give up some control. This involves pushing decision-making power to the people working more closely on customer problems to spark an intrinsic sense of purpose that guides success (rather than attempting to boost performance through edicts and top-down commands).

Reset your defaults.

Being innovative involves breaking habits that have become so ingrained that they've become a kind of "default" setting that blinds you to other ways of working. Habits can lure us into a comfortable state of stagnation if we aren't careful.
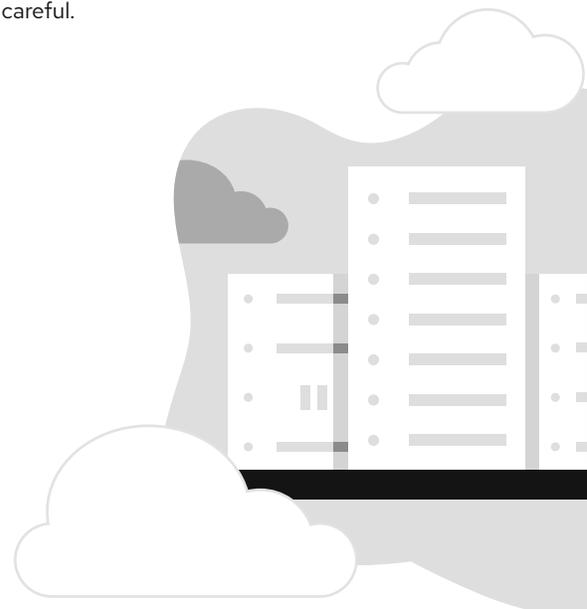
Short-term pain, long-term gain.

Changing organizational culture almost always necessitates short-term discomfort in the service of long-term gain. Listening to ideas from across the organization, hearing that our plans might not be as great as we once thought, and having our minds changed (and changed again) aren't easy tasks. Open leaders appreciate complexity, avoid overly simplified explanations of what's ailing us, and get started on the path to change with honesty and conviction.

> Becoming a more open, inclusive, and meritocratic leader requires hard work.

Change of any kind—either personal or organizational—can be easy to conceptualize in the abstract. But actually doing the work of changing is much more difficult.

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If you want your organization to be more agile, dictate less and engage more.

Jim Whitehurst
Organize for Innovation[3]

Want to read more?
Download the entire *Organize for Innovation* e-book by Jim Whitehurst.

Download the e-book

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[3] Whitehurst, Jim. *Organize for Innovation*, Red Hat, 2021.