

Innovation or Stagnation? Crossing the Creativity Gap in Healthcare

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Like *excellence*, the word *innovation* is often overused in healthcare, frequently espoused in well-intended promotional materials lacking in any real substance. Referred to indiscriminately, innovation is a nice feel-good notion. But implemented strategically, it can mean the difference between performing on par with the industry and achieving exceptional success that includes defining strong healthcare brands, serving as a magnet for patients and employees, and increasingly changing the way healthcare is practiced. True innovation is a powerful concept with an inherently unique capacity to align people, foster creativity, and bring significant improvement to existing processes or transformational change to whole systems and industries.

According to PwC's 2011 Annual Global CEO Survey, innovation is one of the top priorities for executives in almost every industry—not just for realizing efficiencies, but because they see it as integral to growth. In fact, 78 percent of CEOs surveyed believe innovation will generate “significant” new revenue and cost reduction over the next three years. However, as the study also highlights, only about 9 percent of companies described themselves as active innovators, revealing a gap between where most companies are and where CEOs want to go (PwC 2011).

How can this gap be crossed? How do hospitals and healthcare organizations leverage the value of innovation and, more importantly, build a sustainable culture of innovation that becomes part of the organization's DNA over time—especially in the face of unprecedented reforms imposed by the Accountable Care Act?

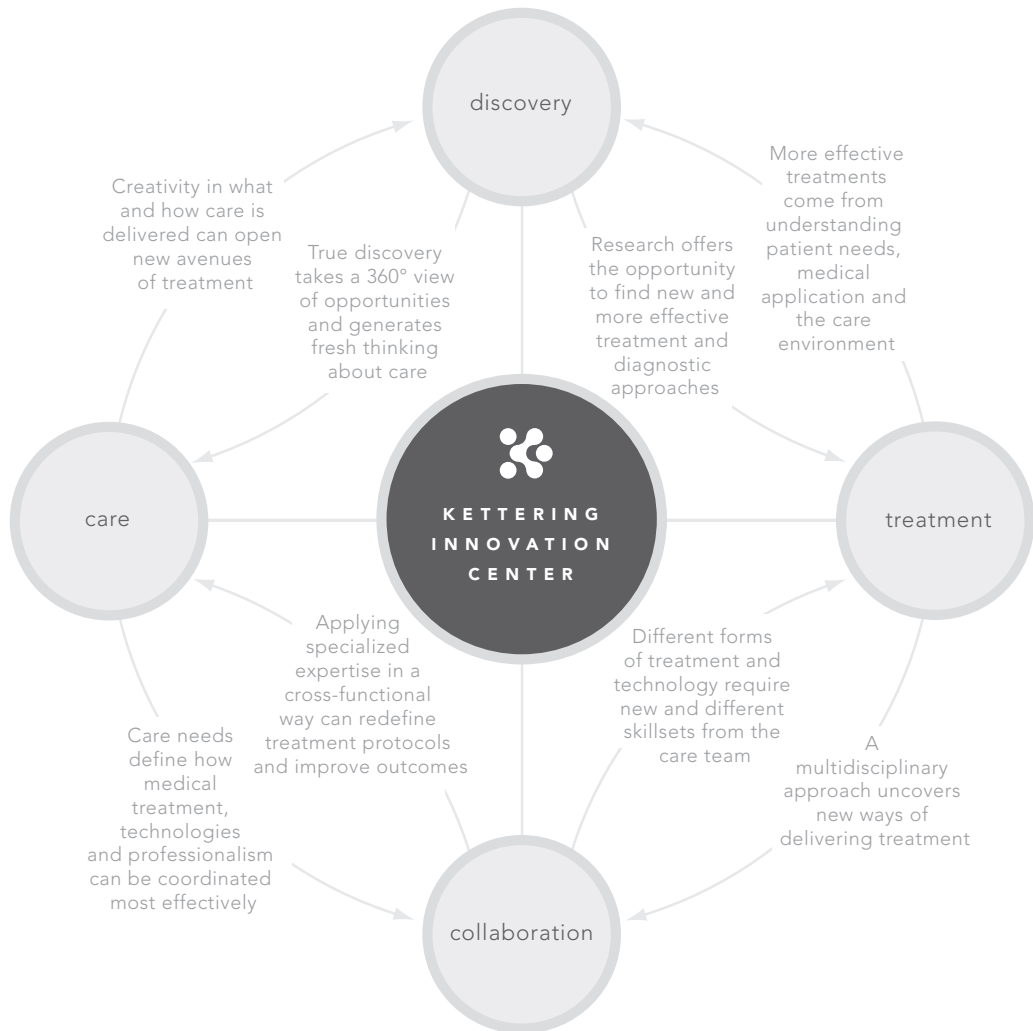
INCUBATORS FOR INNOVATION

Several health systems have created dedicated centers for innovation that function from creative retreats to living laboratories for innovation and creativity. The Mayo Clinic Center for Innovation, founded in 2008, is quickly becoming nationally and internationally recognized as a leader in transforming the delivery and experience of healthcare. The center's initiatives have included a wide range of innovations, including new retail medicine concepts, mobile monitoring tools for asthma patients, a living laboratory for studying independent living for seniors, and an EMR Lite product for small, rural primary care practices.

The Kettering Health Network, founded by famed inventor and businessman Charles Kettering, operates the Innovation Center. The center is dedicated to advancements in imaging science, clinical trials, and translational research, with an emphasis on clinical–corporate partnerships. Its approach, highlighted in Exhibit 1, nicely illustrates the innovation model in action.

EXHIBIT 1

Kettering Innovation Center's Approach



Used with permission from Kettering Innovation Center.

Many other dedicated centers explore potential improvements in all areas of healthcare from the patient experience to new therapies. Kaiser Permanente's Garfield Innovation Center is a place where clinicians and team members can engage in innovative, hands-on experiential scenarios well in advance of their adoption in the patient care environment. The Institute for Pediatric Innovation Hospital Consortium, launched in 2007 and now consisting of seven leading children's hospitals around the country, focuses on identifying pediatric care needs and developing

products to meet those needs. The Innovation Center and Orthopaedics Program at Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC works on orthopedic advancements.

Each of these centers and programs is unique in mission, structure, and approach, but all of them are grounded in a common philosophy of creativity and innovation that is the cornerstone of their success.

FOSTERING INNOVATION

While there is no one single or right approach to increasing innovation within an organization, healthcare executives looking for ways to tap into the innovation spring can benefit from adopting some of these successful core concepts. Taken together, they become an innovator's toolbox for stimulating creativity, collaboration, and improvement aligned with market needs.

Think Big—and Small

Carmine Gallo begins his 2010 book *The Innovation Secrets of Steve Jobs* by highlighting the difference between so-called "innovations with a capital I" and innovations with a small i and the fact that both are essential in business today. While capital-I innovations are real game changers (think Apple's iTunes and iPad), smaller innovations around product improvements and operational efficiencies are just as important to a business's long-term success. For healthcare institutions, incremental improvements can often be easier to implement yet over time have an additive effect that makes their impact even more potent. Such is the case with many Lean and Six Sigma tools that allow performance improvement efforts to focus equally on low-hanging fruit and true breakthrough improvement opportunities.

Be Open to Everyone

Innovations can come from anywhere and anyone in an organization. Whether someone works in patient care, information systems, housekeeping, or patient records, she has ideas that can lead to real innovation. And it's the organization's ability to foster these ideas that sets innovative companies apart from all the others. One new tool to support a more democratic approach to source creative ideas is appreciative inquiry—asking questions, in a positive spirit, to yield and organize ideas from the entire enterprise, from the C-suite to office services. CEOs who seek to galvanize support from their labor force while tapping ideas direct from the front line will find appreciative inquiry an inventive and effective approach.

Look Everywhere for Inspiration

Another common method of gaining insights and stimulating thinking is to look across industries for ideas and innovation. Healthcare organizations can benefit from analyzing the fields of retail, banking, and even aerospace. Key to making this cross-industry exploration work is to realize that the goal is not to find particular processes or solutions to adopt wholesale, but rather to learn and apply the thinking that went

into those successful practices, which may trigger new ways of looking at a healthcare problem.

Use Your Resources

Consider finding a book that profiles a company or industry that has gone from good to great and purchasing a copy for every member of your management team. At Kaiser Permanente’s KP OnCall, we invite managers to a lunchtime book club where ideas can be discussed, vetted, and potentially put into action.

Exhibit 2 highlights a few healthcare innovation resources.

Build Your Brain

While good ideas do sometimes pop out of nowhere, the most successful and sustainable innovation arises from structured processes and a multidisciplinary approach to creative brainstorming. Fortunately, many tools exist—one example is IDEO’s Method Cards, a deck of prompt cards that enhance creative thinking—that in the hands of trained facilitators (or courageous managers) can greatly enhance the innovation process.

Bust Through the Best Practices Ceiling

While identifying best practices can be immensely helpful in shaping the landscape and framing possible improvements, best practices rarely lead to meaningful innovations. When a hospital’s medical director was about to launch a project to improve turnaround times for lab tests, a consulting firm offered him benchmarking data from his peer group. Remarkably, the director rejected the offer. In doing so, he rightly pointed out that the best practices of his peers were irrelevant if he believed

EXHIBIT 2

Innovation Resources

AHRQ Health Care Innovations Exchange	The exchange provides innovations and tools to improve and reduce disparities and offers a vast number of innovation resources.	www.innovations.ahrq.gov
TEDMED	Born out of the popular TED series, this program is dedicated to fostering interaction and innovation in healthcare specifically.	www.tedmed.com/home
The Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership	This philanthropic initiative was created to bring innovation to the forefront of healthcare leadership.	www.ache.org/abt_ache/fundfaq.cfm

his potential was, in fact, much greater than theirs. Instead, he directed the consultant to use a Six Sigma tool called a capability analysis to determine how much his department would need to improve to go from current performance to what was demanded by his target market.

Crowdsource Innovation

One rising approach to innovation and idea-generation is crowdsourcing—mass collaboration. While the technique is not without its limitations and pitfalls, crowdsourcing can be a powerful creative tool. Healthcare examples of successful crowdsourcing abound. One east Tennessee health system asked women through focus groups and online surveys what they wanted to see in a new women’s hospital more than a year in advance of its opening. The Harvard Clinical and Translational Science Center used crowdsourcing to collect questions and answers that may lead to new discoveries in treating diabetes (Buskirk 2010).

THE INNOVATION IMPERATIVE

“Now is not a good time.” This ever-present innovation killer remains a threat to middle managers seeking to introduce creative concepts to their organization. Unlike competing priorities, innovation merely competes with itself and with its alternative—doing nothing at all. Ignoring the need to innovate is tantamount to accepting defeat in today’s healthcare marketplace. The next ten years will show a healthcare field where only the strong survive. Managers at all levels with an interest in innovation and armed with the tools provided will find an increasingly receptive audience among a workforce hopeful of a new way to get work done.

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