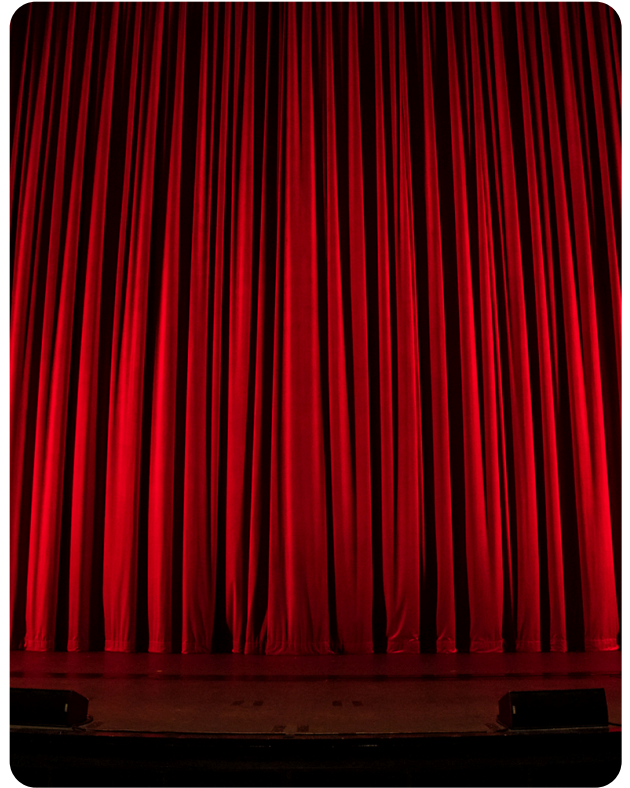


Article February 23, 2024

# Pulling back the curtain on innovation theater



Trevor Anulewicz  
Managing Director,  
Strategic  
Consultancy

Share:   

3 min. read

Topics:

[Unlock a culture of innovation](#)

Every organization wants to be the disruptor, the trendsetter, and the undisputed leader in their industry. The problem is, every *other* business wants to do the same, creating a constant battle for the ever-illusory competitive edge. Continuous, sustained improvement efforts are the bare minimum for keeping pace with evolving technology, trends, and market conditions, but if you want your organization to secure the market's lead spot, you need truly transformative innovation.

This is usually easier said than done, though. NTT DATA's [2023 Innovation Index](#) survey of 1,000 North American executives found that only 21% definitively met their innovation goals. While most of these innovation hindrances were attributed to data, workforce challenges, technology modernization, and customer experience (CX), you must get out of the weeds and ask yourself a pivotal question: are you actually innovating, or just putting on a really good show?

You can ask a chosen group of "innovators" to plaster colorful sticky notes all over a conference room or have them perform a couple of hackathons in hopes of generating at least one great idea, but if the overall business doesn't see a positive impact, then what was the point? Too many of today's enterprises get caught up in performative changemaking and innovation theater. The problem is that behavior actually undermines the culture of innovation you really want and almost never leads to transformative change. So how do you know if you've fallen into the innovation theater cycle, and how do you get out of it?

## Spotting the signs

When wearing rose-tinted glasses, red flags just look like flags. It may seem easy to identify competitors that are engaging in innovation theater, but much harder to see the signs within your own organization. You may fall into a trap of thinking you're doing enough, that every new idea equates to progress, and that every individual innovative effort is a step in the right direction. But can you identify the business impact all of that has created?

Here are the telltale signs of innovation theater:

- **Non-measurable results:** Your results – or lack thereof – are the most glaring indicator. Your efforts may be yielding small results, just not the ones you wanted or expected. If you're forced to try to justify mediocre outcomes to your stakeholders, it screams "this was just for show!"
- **Trend chasing:** Are you chasing trends, hype, and inflated expectations instead of actual innovation? With so many exciting new tech developments unfolding all the time, it can be tempting to pursue the latest and greatest just for the sake of it. If your organization has a case of shiny object syndrome, you've also got a case of innovation theater.
- **Copycatting:** That said, being an early adopter of technology and keeping pace with your competitors is not necessarily a bad thing. However, if your only strategy for innovation is simply doing what everyone else is doing, you'll never gain the competitive edge. True innovation breeds leaders, and your goal is to become who everyone else wants to follow. That means taking risks, carving new paths, and disrupting the status quo.
- **Single-serve solutions:** Another easy trap to fall into is relying too heavily on a single solution rather than seeing the bigger picture. We commonly see this with businesses who rely on hackathons as their primary source of idea generation. These events tend to be great for marketing, but bad or downright useless for actual business benefit when treated as a standalone. Operating this way is like trying to make an orchestra out of a single instrument. You'll get some of the notes and may even be able to sketch out a tune, but you won't have the complete, robust symphony. Just the same, putting all your efforts behind one lean design thinking tactic is not a substitute for true enterprise innovation.
- **Broken or no processes:** What does your innovation infrastructure look like? Innovation pipelines that break, bottleneck, and rely on gut instinct versus systems and data are usually doomed to fail.
- **Siloed teams:** If your innovation efforts rely solely on an innovation team, you've created a clique instead of a company full of aligned and strategic changemakers. They're seemingly always busy and ever-eager to flaunt shiny concepts, but they rarely – if ever – drive new products or services to market. These siloed teams seldomly get anything into market – or, if they do, it creates only a fraction of the results you were hoping for. But what can you really expect from a fractured culture of haves and have-nots, with all the information, power, and say-so in the hands of a privileged few?
- **Wasted resources:** At the end of the day, sinking time, money, and energy into vapor-ware is a waste of valuable resources that no business can afford. No results means no ROI. In a sink-or-swim competitive landscape, your business has no choice but to evolve and improve. By wasting critical resources on short-term vanity or dead-end projects, you are severely hindering your organization's chances of continued survival.

## Grab the vaudeville hook and get everyone off the stage

When you look at all the consequences above, it's easy to see that innovation theater should be wholly rejected. If you spot your own organization in any of the above scenarios, it's time for a much more effective innovation program.

Are you currently in a position to create truly transformative innovation? We've got 10 questions to help you find out. [Download our ebook to test your readiness for enterprise-level innovation.](#)