



When I think of innovation, my mind tends to wander over to stories such as the [junior officer who revolutionized gunnery in the U.S. Navy](#), [Steve jobs introducing the very first iPod](#), or hover tanks. Okay, hover tanks aren't a thing yet, but tankers have been throwing track in combat since World War I; it's about time we innovated! The point is that when many of us think of innovation, we see it as some sort of very large game-changing thing, when that doesn't have to be the case.

Innovation can be small, with a lower case "i". It can be about making our day-to-day lives in the military better. We just have to be open to it. In [The Art of Innovation](#), author Tom Kelley recommends some great practices for establishing a culture of innovation in our organizations.

Keep a bug list. Kelley recommends keeping a list of things that bug us in our units and asking the question, "Why/Why not?" This opens us up to areas and processes that could use some innovation. There are many aspects of Army life that are mandated from the highest levels of the military; trying to fix those might be a bridge too far. Stick with those that are within your realm of influence and ask yourself: "Why are we still doing it?" and/or "Why not

do something completely different?”

Turn nouns into verbs. Think of processes and events as verbs instead of nouns. For example, take the standard Army Leave Form DA 31. Turn it into a verb. What does “Leave Forming” look like? First, a Soldier prints and fills out a unit-level Leave packet cover sheet. They then print their Leave Form and fill it out. Next, they go online, fill out the [Travel Risk Planning System](#) (TRiPS) worksheet, and print it. All of that just starts the process; there are still several steps to go before a soldier will have their leave approved. Is there a way to shrink the number of steps in “leave forming”? I think so, and there are some great cost saving measures that could be implemented as well. Doing some quick bar napkin math, one of my previous units used 45,000 sheets of paper a year just on Leave Forms and 4-day pass approvals. Turning nouns into verbs allows to us better understand and evaluate the experience, which opens the door to improvement and some small-scale innovation.

Build to learn. Many of our innovative ideas might not turn out that great in the beginning. That’s okay. Kelley says “Focused prototyping helps resolve little critical problems one by one.” Instead of sitting on a unit-level innovation for weeks or months trying to perfect it, let it loose! Start launching early iterations and learn from the setbacks and successes. Returning to the Leave Form example, develop a new method of applying for leave, and test it out on a small group to see how it goes. Over time, you will be able to perfect the process, and in turn, learn a lot about innovation.

While not specifically mentioned in the book, I’ve witnessed several other practices throughout my career that can lead to some great innovations in our units. Below are a few:

In Small Units, Crowd-source it! I once met a company commander at Fort Hood, who was wrestling with a DUI problem in his unit. Instead of sitting behind closed doors with his First Sergeant trying to devise a solution, he turned it over to his company. His soldiers and NCOs put their heads together and came up with a program to help curb DUIs. And it

worked! Several months after implementation, the unit was still operating without a single DUI. By crowd-sourcing the problem, his unit was able to develop an innovative solution, which gave buy-in to the program.

For Higher Echelons, Create an Innovation Cell. Although it is not longer around, the Navy's [CNO's Rapid Innovation Cell](#) was a great example of this practice. Their mission was to "identify and rapidly field emerging technologies to meet the Navy's most pressing challenges." Sailors applied to get into this organization, and it was a one year assignment. Innovation Cells don't have to be at the highest echelons or be focused only on technology. In his book, [The Accidental Admiral](#), Admiral (ret) James Staviridis recounts how he created an innovation cell in one of his commands, which helped him address some complex problem-sets and spur innovation in his organization. An innovation cell doesn't even have to be in the same physical location. I know of one senior leader who has created a closed Facebook Group to assist him in flushing out ideas as well as generating new ones. He extends invites to innovative people he meets along the way. Commanders could create innovation cells at the Brigade and above level to address their organization challenges.

Innovation Presentations instead of Safety Briefs. Instead of setting aside every Friday formation for safety briefings, take one Friday a month or quarter to allow Soldiers to present their ideas to the formation. Who knows? The next innovative idea might belong to a PFC who has only been in the unit for a week!

We all have the opportunity to make the military a little bit better than when we joined. And if we want to create an "innovative" or "adaptive" force we have to foster a culture that supports it. Adopting some of these practices will help us move in that direction as an Army. So the next time you hear the word *innovation*, don't be like me and look for Steve Jobs' ghost or a hover tank, just look around you.

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