

## Keys to Success

# Innovative leaders excel at creativity, collaboration, courage, and execution

**Top innovators' behaviors and traits cluster in four key areas, Korn Ferry's global research on 3,000 mid- to senior-level leaders shows. And when such leaders are innovative, the data suggest that their organizations are more likely to be innovative, too.**

For companies around the globe that are striving to make innovation a pivotal part of their future success, new research from the Korn Ferry Institute offers some key insights on what sets highly innovative leaders apart. The data<sup>1</sup> can help organizations better understand the personal attributes linked to innovative behavior—and how having such individuals can help boost organizations' overall innovative standing.

The competencies, traits, drivers, and experiences we examined are part of Korn Ferry's Four Dimensions of Talent (KF4D; see Figure 1), which provide a whole-person view of innovative individuals.

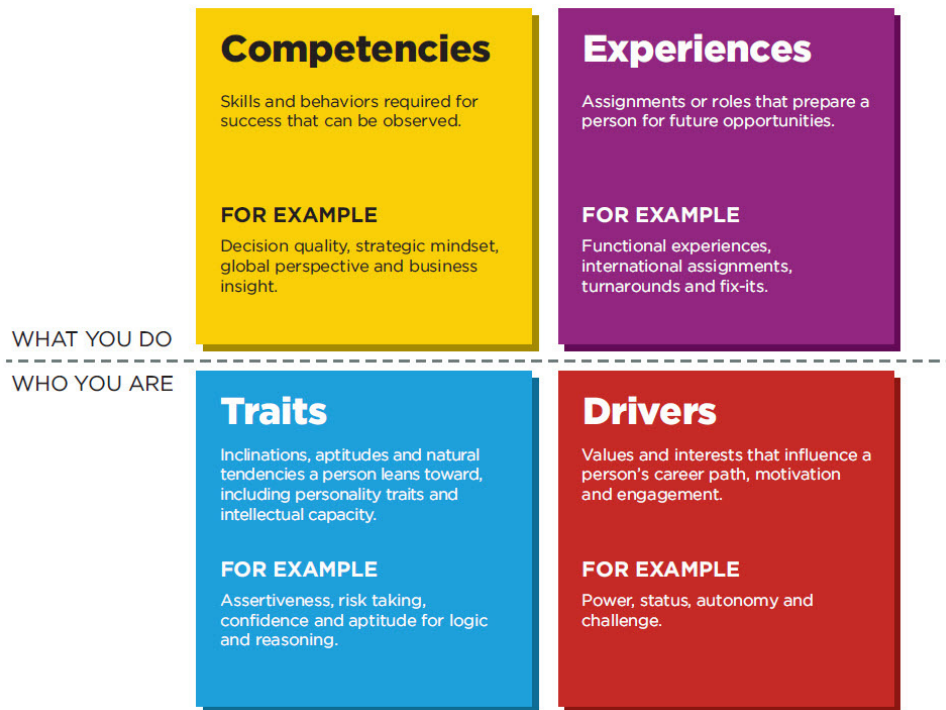
We found that the attributes in leaders deemed most innovative clustered around four general themes: creativity, collaboration, courage, and execution. Organizations may wish to consider the role each plays in fostering innovation:

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<sup>1</sup>The institute scrutinized global data from more than 3,000 mid- to senior-level leaders in a variety of functions and industries. Highly innovative and less innovative leaders were identified using the top and bottom quartile of scores on a simulation-based assessment of innovation competency. These more and less innovative groups of leaders were compared in terms of their other competency ratings, self-reported experiences, personality traits, and motivational drivers. The characteristics showing large average differences between more and less innovative leaders were conceptually sorted into the four major themes discussed here.

Figure 1

**KF4D**



## 1. Creativity

Creativity involves coming up with novel ideas, while innovation is a broader concept that encompasses both developing new and useful ideas as well as implementing them (Cummings and Oldham 1997; Hülshager et al. 2009). The traits of curiosity, adaptability, and thought agility; competencies of strategic mindset and situational adaptability; and having experience with product and strategy development all fall under this theme. That's because they relate to developing something new and coming up with new ways to adapt to a quickly changing environment. Innovative people also tend to be more strongly driven by challenge than their peers are; this could be what feeds their need for creative outlet.

## 2. Collaboration

The innovative leaders that the Korn Ferry research identified demonstrated the competencies of communicating effectively and promoting teamwork as well as the traits of sociability, empathy, affiliation, and humility. These are all important in facilitating innovation within an organization. Team members who trust and are comfortable with one another can let their guard down and allow the creative juices

to flow without fear of judgment. Listening to team members bounce ideas off one another can spark even better ideas, resulting in more superior concepts and plans than any member could produce alone.

### **3. Courage**

Many people may be creative, but to share novel ideas with others requires courage, risk taking, and self-confidence. Leaders and others gain in these areas through work experiences with high risk and visibility. This can make them more comfortable, at least to some extent, with the idea of failure, and that therefore may make them more likely to take a chance on an idea. For executives at higher levels, this also can press them to lead boldly, influence others, and build needed support to adopt and embrace novel ideas.

### **4. Execution**

Besides the three previous factors, a drive to achieve results and execute is imperative for innovation. Those rated as most innovative tend to take initiative in their organizations. They don't just think up ideas; they also take a risk by sharing them with others. They then work with teammates to refine them and finally execute them. It's unsurprising that leaders show greater innovative capacity if they have project and general management experience. Other factors also can propel creative ideas into reality, including leaders' traits like energy level, need for achievement, and competencies such as customer focus.

### **Broader relevance.**

The last two decades have seen a flood of discussions and initiatives focused on innovation and organization success. Organizations must not only stay ahead of the competition with novel ideas and products (Oldham and Cummings 1996) but also innovate to keep pace with and stay relevant in rapidly changing markets. Organization-wide innovation results from a combination of employee characteristics and situational factors (Amabile 1997).

When employees, the building blocks of a company, are more innovative, the organization as a whole is more likely to be innovative. Korn Ferry data show that organizations that have earned a spot on at least one of three popular media lists of innovative companies—compiled by Fast Company, Forbes, and Thomson Reuters—tend to have a larger proportion of innovative employees than organizations not on the lists have; depending on the position level, this gap can be as wide as 18%. The innovative achievement lists are based on a variety of criteria, such as number of patents, investor estimates of potential for innovation, and nomination processes.



## **Fostering a desired quality.**

What can organizations do to encourage innovation? Besides hiring individuals with the types of characteristics that Korn Ferry research has identified, organizations can help create an optimal environment for innovation by:

- Assigning projects to teams rather than individuals to encourage collaboration.
- Providing intellectual stimulation with efforts such as “lunch-and-learns” or “brown bag” sessions, where recent breakthroughs can be presented and discussed.
- Challenging employees with tough problems to solve.
- Providing employees with the autonomy to explore different ways of tackling their work duties.
- Encouraging employees to spend time each week to be free thinking, imaginative, and creative—to “play in the sandbox”—and then share what they come up with.
- Embracing mistakes as part of the learning process by highlighting stories of past failures and subsequent successes.

## References

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