

# An “Innovation League” of Their Own

## Saskatoon looks inward for innovative solutions

For several years in a row, the City of Saskatoon has been one of Canada’s fastest growing municipalities. In fact, it is estimated that the city’s population will double to more than 500,000 within the next 30 years.

A recent and frequent influx of younger people is one of the key reasons for the city’s growth. According to Statistics Canada, the average age in Saskatoon is between 34 and 35 – approximately five years below the national average.

To keep up with a four percent population growth year after year and the changing needs and expectations of citizens (particularly newcomers from other provinces or across the world, as well as the younger demographics from larger cities), the city recognized the need to become more innovative and creative, to go beyond conventional approaches, and to modernize the way it provides services to citizens.

As part of its 10-year strategic plan, one of the city’s strategic goals through 2023 is to create “a culture of continuous improvement.” In particular, “building capacity” among all 3,500 employees posed a huge undertaking: that is, equipping and empowering them to regularly identify opportunities for improvement within city operations.

How could employees learn to be innovative on a regular basis and to embrace ongoing change as a good thing?

Figure 1  
The i5 Process



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## Innovation in a Box

Because staff members know the operations and have great ideas on how to improve service to citizens, the City of Saskatoon recognizes the importance of encouraging employees to bring forward ideas and providing opportunities for them to participate in driving organizational change. The objective, then, was to find a solution to facilitate innovative thinking across the entire organization.

In particular, the city wanted a business process that:

- ▶ was straightforward and simple for everyone to understand;
- ▶ could be easily implemented and duplicated by all levels of the organization; and
- ▶ would help staff frequently look at the organization and figure out innovative ways to get from an idea, all the way through to implementation.

Through a web search, the city learned a five-step structured innovation process to facilitate innovative thinking across the organization (see Figure 1).

According to the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, not all people are created equal when it comes to innovation. Humans are diverse in many ways – including the way they think. And, the way people think drives how people communicate, make decisions, solve problems, and innovate.

Research shows that a structured process can produce 500 percent more useful ideas than traditional brainstorming methods. By bringing different thinkers together, providing methodologies and tools, and facilitating the “spring-boarding” of people’s ideas off one another,

an organization can greatly increase the number, range, and originality of ideas those people come up with.

## Introducing change

To support the city’s leadership commitments, 120 leaders came together in April to learn about the i5 Process and to engage in a half-day brainstorming session focused on exploring some key opportunities to improve both internal and external customer service.

The leadership commitments are a critical ingredient in accomplishing the city’s vision and mission, and helping to achieve the strategic goals.

Feedback on the session was excellent. One participant noted that “it really hit home that everyone is different and can bring different skills to the table.” Others commented on how they could see how “putting a plan together gets results,” and how using innovation tools and techniques could help generate discussion and identify wins.

Following the leadership session, approximately 30 staff – representing different parts of the organization and a broad range of experience and knowledge – came together to participate in a two-day Innovation Bootcamp. There, they learned and applied the innovation program process and tools to expand on the ideas from the leadership session and develop six concrete proposals for presentation to the city manager and senior executive team.

What evolved was a very energizing two days – and something tangible that made participating employees realize their ability to effect change.

Through the use of one of the tools, this group of staff named them-

selves the “Innovation League” and have started working with others in the organization to help use the innovation process as they work through real-life issues.

## Dragon’s Den

Two weeks following the Innovation Bootcamp, each group was given an opportunity to present its idea to the city’s senior executive team. Borrowing the concept of the CBC show *Dragon’s Den*, participants were provided with play money, so they could choose the ideas in which they wanted to “invest.”

Leaders loved the concept: not only did laughter and banter ensue, but they were also impressed with the calibre of ideas and the stages of development to which those ideas had advanced in a two-day window. (Several managers even mentioned that this was one of the best meetings they’d ever attended!)

The overall sentiment among the executive team: all ideas were fantastic – and consequently, all six were given a green light to move forward.

The experience had an incredibly positive impact on participating employees. Many of them were administrative assistants and field employees – people who had never had an opportunity to present to the senior management team. For them to have that exposure and receive the feedback they did was very empowering.

## Next Steps

Of course, being innovative doesn’t always have to be about big ideas. It can also be about doing small things to bring fun back into the workplace, thereby:

- ▶ building relationships across the organization;

- ▶ increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of operations; and
- ▶ providing a better customer experience.

For example, the city recently decided to hold a monthly pizza lunch following regular Friday management meetings. Instead of managers running off to their next meeting, they are now encouraged to stay, eat something, have a few laughs with

their colleagues, and build better relationships. The objective through this simple endeavour: to break down silos across the organization.

Over the next few months, the Innovation League will continue to use the innovation program tools, meet on a monthly basis to report on successes within their own projects, practice the tools together, and par-

ticipate in some of the city's major initiatives.

Today, more and more City of Saskatoon employees are looking forward to participating in change. Led by the Innovation League, this multi-year project will see the city build a culture of continuous improvement – embedding innovative thinking into the overall fabric of the organization. **MW**

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