



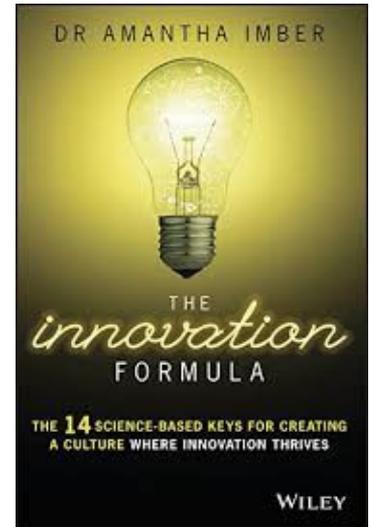
The Science of Innovation with Amantha Imber



By Mark Bidwell



A podcast interview with Dr Amantha Imber, innovation psychologist, author, inductee to Australian Business Women's Hall of Fame, and founder of Australia's leading innovation consultancy Inventium.



“What we’re doing by using science is we’re taking the uncertainty out of an area of innovation that is full of ambiguity, and uncertainty.”

Welcome to the Innovation Ecosystem Podcast. My name is Mark Bidwell, and with me today is Dr. Amantha Imber. Welcome to the show Amantha.

Thanks for having me.

So, how do you answer the dinner party question, Amantha? What do you do?

It's a tricky one, but in a nutshell I say I help make companies more initiative, its pretty simple..

How do you get into this? Why are you spending your life doing this?

Well, it comes from two passions. So, certainly I've always been very passionate about innovation, and creativity, and I used to work in advertising as a consumer psychologist, and when I was working back in advertising back – gosh like nine or ten years now. I felt like I was losing my passion for what I was doing, and so I decided to give my boss three months' notice, and I said I'll be out of here in three months. I knew that innovation was a passion, and when I began looking at the space I was also thinking well it makes sense to – into another one of my passions, which is science. So, ever since finishing my PhD I remained a massive science geek, and in the innovation spaces all this great research that, unfortunately, remains hidden in the depths of academia, that actually shows us scientifically proven ways that we can become more innovative as organizations, or as individuals, or teams. And I thought, wouldn't it be great to combine those two passions of science and innovation, which I really didn't see anyone around the world doing at the time. So, that's how I got into where I am, and the passions that have driven me.

Excellent, and I'm curious because your most recent book, *The Innovation Formula*, is basically a meta-analysis of the science that underpins innovation. We can get into that in a minute, but I guess that is the end point of that research essentially. Is that correct?

That's exactly right, so the book is all about a handful of meta-analysis that have been conducted that have asked the question what are the biggest drivers of creating the culture where innovation thrives, and that's essentially what the book's about. Answering that question.

Okay, well let's come back to that in a minute, but you're based in Australia, and we have lots of listeners oddly enough in Australia, but for the American, and the European audience for this show, the Innovation Ecosystem, what are some of the more innovative Australian companies that we might not have heard about, and what do they do?

Well, it's a good question. There's one of the things that we do in Inventium is we run the nation's, Australia's, biggest list that ranks the most innovative companies in Australia. So, a company at the top of the list, which was the 2016 was just published a couple of weeks ago, was a company called [Planet Innovation](#), which is a very appropriate name to top an innovation list. They're like a product engineering based firm, and come up with all these sorts of amazing generally technical engineering driven products for their clients. One particular product that they had entered in this year's list was a device called [nplex](#), which is actually one of the world's first portable diagnostic devices that can diagnose various infectious diseases from HIV through the influenza, and you can actually diagnose these diseases without the need for a lab, which is quite revolutionary. So, the



applications of this are huge in terms of going into developing countries where obviously infectious diseases and outbreaks are common in a high-risk activity, and you can now diagnose them without the need to actually go to a lab. So, quite revolutionary. So, that is one example of what is happening here in Australia.

Now, I remember 20 years ago when I was working for a consulting firm, and launching the e-business for a professional services firm. One of our partners was an Australian. He kept on saying we need to bring it across to Australia because it's an important enough market, but it's also a small enough market to use as a laboratory, if you like, for trialing new products. Is that still the case, and is that your perspective?

Yeah, it's a funny thing in Australia in hearing that because it feels like a big market when you're in it, and live in the second biggest city in Australia, which is Melbourne. So, as a consumer, or customer of various products. I don't feel like I'm living in a test market, but that's cool if I am. I think it's pretty fun living in a test market.

It's all about perspective, I guess. I guess the other thing let's talk about a couple of your clients who you're working with, we've got Lego, which is 65 years old. Disney, which is 90 years old, or almost 90. Coca-Cola, which is 130 years old. Now, these are companies, which obviously have got enormously strong cultures that have contributed to their success over the years. So, can you say a little bit about how have you worked with these companies, and what have you done that has shifted, or changed how these organizations operate and innovate?

Yes, so I think the reason why these companies have given us a call is because our approach to innovation is so unique. So many innovation consultants, and consultancies just base their work on opinion. What they think will work, or perhaps what works for them in an organization that we're working in before, but because we base all of our IP, our tools and frameworks, and what's actually been scientifically proven to work. I think it's quite an appealing notion to these particular companies. Essentially, what we're doing by using science is we're taking the uncertainty out of an area of innovation that is full of ambiguity, and uncertainty. So, trying to make things more certain for these companies in terms of innovation outcomes.

In terms of a company like Coca-Cola for instance. The challenge they've got is how do you balance the short term delivery of results, and maintaining the machine which has demonstrated such remarkable resilience over 130 years versus trying to transform it, and trying to get people to do different things, or things differently in the organization. How do you think about that particular tension that a lot of CEOs have got to manage?

Yeah, and it's the reality for a lot of our clients. Balancing short term results with long term gains, and certainly if you're playing the innovation game it's a long term gain. So, certainly there are things that you can do to get quicker results when you're innovating, for example, running lots of quick and fast and cheap experiments to very quickly test things rather than running slow and large pilot studies for example. We're always looking at how can we speed things up because it's one of those business realities having to balance short-term needs with also the long term gain that is innovation.

Yeah, yeah, and let's get into the book because you touched on it earlier on, and also as you said, the science-based approach for which, as you say, you are unique versus the competition, is at the heart of the book. Now, if I was to summarize it. There are 14 strategies, which I guess which you classed it into the level of the individual, the team, the leadership. An organizational level if you like. Now, maybe you could just pull out a handful of them just to give you some of these strategies, which that's basically what's going through my mind, Amantha, these are science based, but on the other hand the actual specific strategies appear very intangible. They appear rather difficult to get your mind around, and to measure the before and after. So, maybe you can just help us by picking a couple of these, and just talking us through the science, and then what does that look like in practice, and how do you measure the before and after if you like.

Sure, so one of the biggest problems I find that a lot of our clients particularly large organization space is trying to foster a culture where risk taking is invoked. So, one of the 14 chapters in the book is all about risk taking, and I think it's quite a hard one for companies to really embrace and put into action. So, what's really important for organizations to think about there is thinking about what are clear ways that they can signal to employees that risk taking is okay. One of the example that I go into in the book comes from the [Tata](#) group. A big organization, about 100,000 employees globally, and something they've done to really bring an acceptance of risk taking to life is an award program that they started, the [Innovista](#) awards, which are an annual rewards program for innovation, and what they've done is one of the categories of the awards are called the Dare to Try awards, which is essentially awarded to ideas that have failed. So, its a great way of signaling to everyone in the organization that we are ok with with failure. In fact, we're actually going to award it. Give it a prize.

Yeah, I was going to say that's fascinating because I've been in front of executive groups talking to them about willingness to fail, and to take risks, and often the response that one gets is rolled eyes. Well, we're a

“Tata created the Dare to Try awards, which is essentially awarded to ideas that have failed. So, its a great way of signaling to everyone in the organization that we are ok with with failure.”



public company. We don't fail, we can't fail. It's a very hard emotional concept for people to get their minds around, particularly, if they've built their careers, or their self-images on never having failed at all. How does a company like Tata actually- how have they done this? What's the mindset of leaders to enable this program to be put into place, and to be as successful as it appears to be based on having read the book?

Yeah, and it's really about just not paying lip service to risk taking and innovation because I think that's what happens in a lot of organizations where senior leaders talk about innovation, and they talk about risk taking, and failure being okay. There's actually no action that follows that talk. So, I think what Tata group had got it really right is that they've actually put some action behind the talk, and that's the fundamental difference, and a really important thing for organizations, and particularly leaders to focus on. Follow up your talk with actions.

Yeah, yeah, and I guess there are a couple of other things here. You touch on blameless post-mortems, which are very powerful. I've also used pre-mortems, which is another way of at least enhancing the likelihood of success. I suppose the other piece here is around the learning, and if one is able to identify very clearly up front what are the learning objectives from this project as well as the financial objectives, then that becomes part of the assessment, and so you're always going to take away something significant from a project irrespective of whether you got the financial outcomes or not.

That's exactly right. Yeah, absolutely, and I think what [Etsy](#) started doing around blameless post-mortems, which I write about in the book, is fantastic. Essentially, if you've got a culture where it's just a bit of a blame game where something goes wrong people look to point the finger. That's really bad for innovation because people aren't going to take risks because it's the fear of being blamed, but what Etsy have done with the blameless post mortems is basically said let's look for the cause as opposed to the culprit, which is a fundamental difference, which really helps get away from that blame culture.

Yeah, lovely. The other nice structure about your book which struck me is the fundamental principle here that the individual is the main agent of change, and of innovation. So, you start with the individual, and here there are three different areas. There's challenge, there's autonomy, and there's recognition. Let's put you on the spot a little bit here. So, if I was working for you, and sitting in one of your meetings what would I see you doing? What would I hear you saying to create this sense of challenge, and autonomy for me as one of your employees in your company? Just give us a sense of how you go about doing it, and what drives your behavior as a leader in these two specific areas. I think these are areas which are quite difficult to – these are quite personal how you'd measured them. So, I just want to know how the science works here. Can you unpack that a little bit for us?

Yeah, absolutely. So, in terms of autonomy, gosh we give people a lot of autonomy at Inventium, and even recently we've moved to a holacracy, or self-managing team's environment where essentially there are no managers at Inventium anymore. So, people are responsible for setting their own goals, for example. They're responsible for working out how they are going to achieve those goals, and they're working out responsible for working out what does their role look like? What are the kind of activities that energize them, that they want to become part of their role? So, autonomy is absolutely a massive part of how things are constructed in Inventium, and something I just think is so important because I think, unfortunately, in many organizations not enough autonomy and control is given to employees, and instead people are just told what to do, which completely reduces innovation.

Absolutely, so this is Mark Bidwell interviewing Amantha Imber on the Innovation Ecosystem. So, that concept of autonomy is fascinating, Amantha. One of my earlier guests in the previous season was a guy called Larry Cunningham who wrote the biography of Warren Buffett's businesses, which is Berkshire Hathaway, which is one of the largest market cap companies in the world, and I'm sure you probably are familiar with. Certainly, you have a number of operations in Australia. What he pointed out is there's a really strong link between autonomy, and performance, and that is probably better optimized in [Berkshire Hathaway](#) in 50 operating companies that make it up than in many other companies on the planet. Have you – how do you see as an owner of your company, or certainly a founder of your company, how do you see this link between performance, and autonomy? Does that exist for instance from your perspective?

It absolutely does, absolutely. I think if managers are simply telling their staff what to do, and how to do it. You're essentially stripping staff the chance to think creatively, and the chance to come up with a new way of doing things, and potentially coming up with a better way of doing things. Unfortunately, that lack of autonomy is just life in many places because managers are scared to relinquish control themselves, and might think that they know best. So, when you can let go of the reins, so to speak, you get really amazing results. People can really surprise you, and everyone's got a different point of view on projects that they're working on, and incorporating, giving people the chance to bring to the table their different point of view on how they could best go about executing this project, or solving this problem, is where the best kind of innovations happen.

“As a manager, instead of asking who's got capacity ask yourself who would feel challenged by this task”



Interesting, as you – I fully agree with you, but I also – and I also wonder what are the – if let's say there's a leader listening to this podcast today, and is – they are probably the way they lead is more of the traditional hierarchical, old-fashioned manner, and this conversation around autonomy is leaving them thinking well that might work in some organizations, but it will never work in my, for example, heavily regulated incumbent, industrial organization. What would you say to them, and more importantly what would you do with them if they wanted to go on this journey?

Yeah, and the reason is because most of our clients fit that description. They're working in highly regulated industries. Who isn't? There's a lot of bureaucracy, and rules, and regulations, and all that stuff. The first thing I do if I was a manager, or working with one of these managers, is look at how they go about delegating tasks and projects. Like, for example, one of the things I'd be looking for when they give one of their staff a project is thinking well are there clear goals there? Because that's important. It's important that leaders set clear goals in terms of what this project should achieve, or what they're trying to do. Then they're looking at how much instruction are they giving to that staff member about how to actually get from A to B, and what's damaging to innovation is when there's a whole lot of instruction in terms of here's how to get to A to B. Just follow these steps, but if they take away those steps of how to get to A to B, and instead just go well here's where you need to get to. Up to you how you want to do that, and I'm here if there's anything I can do to help. You're going to get a far better outcome, and you're going to get significantly more innovative, and creative outcome as well by just not actually telling your staff member how to do their job. Another thing to think about is I think what happens when managers think about delegating work is they ask the question of who's got capacity to work on these projects? Essentially, who's got time, and who could do this pretty quickly, and easily for me? We know that when people feel challenged they produce more innovative outcomes. So, if you're a manager that's purely thinking about capacity when you delegate projects and tasks. You're not actually giving staff the best chance of feeling challenge, and therefore being innovative with the work that they do. So instead of asking who's got capacity ask yourself who would feel challenged by this task. It's a far better question that managers should be asking when they've got projects to distribute to their team.

“If you are a hungry intrapreneur that does want to make a difference, there's definitely stuff that you can do that will make a difference.”

Yeah, which requires managers to think rather differently about their individual direct reports in terms of the – looking at things from a different angle if you like. It is a different question. It is probably quite a difficult question for people to answer. Unless they're deep into understanding the specific characteristics of their employees I suspect.

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

So, one of the things that I guess I was also intrigued about, and it's a theme running through here is the role of the leader. The team level, for instance, you talk about the debate that the willingness of a team leader to create an environment where people can actually have active debate. Then another of the big leaders I think that you talk about is senior leader support. What does – if I was to come down to Melbourne, and sit in one of your team meetings for instance. What would I see you doing? What would I hear you saying to foster this kind of debate in your team?

Yeah, and it's a really good question. I think for us, and I think it's something that we're working on as a team where we're by nature a very optimistic team, and personally I don't think that it's something that we talk about as a team there are enough black hats on the team, and certainly the people that do wear that black hat that are the ones challenging things. I absolutely love their point of view, and they get a really good amount of air time when we're having discussions, or debates about something like should we go down this path strategically or for example? So, it's interesting when we're recruiting people we put them through quite a lot of stages, and various assessments, and one of the assessments actually looks at how good are they at speaking out when they disagree, and having different points of views? So, it's certainly something that is really important to us in recruitment, and I think it's, for me, I think about it's really important to give those people that do have opposing views a significant amount of air time because if we're all just in agreement, we're not going to get to the best solution. So, that's certainly one of the things that you'd observe.

Yeah, absolutely. I'm curious. I think you've mentioned in the research I did for this conversation I came across some comment around how you spend a huge amount of your time interviewing. I'm curious, what else do you look for in candidates, and secondly, and this isn't meant to be presumptuous. When you're interviewing clients if you like as to whether you're going to take that. What are you looking for there in terms of either warnings, or things that say yes I must work with this person, or this organization?

Yeah, that's a good question. Certainly with our own recruitment, it's a mix of all sorts of things. Obviously, that there's, not obviously, but there's a lot of skills testing, so a lot of simulation-based activities. Culture fit is everything. We get a lot of people that look fantastic on paper, and that they're just culturally when we make them all get to know them. We just think it's not quite going to be right. For example, we're very collaborative culture. So, when we meet people who are naturally quite competitive in nature, and competing against people



on their team we know that that's not going to work out too well, and we're just interested in how people think as well. So, there's various different test simulation culture fit values fit as well.

So, all those sorts of things come out in about the ten stages that we have. When it comes to clients, and certainly for us it is like a recruitment process because we do actually say no to some clients where we don't think that we can have the impact that we want. One of the things that we know is really important, and certainly I should preface this by saying one of the really good things about the position that we're in is that to start with – we never go out and look for work. We only work with organizations that approach us, which for us it's like the first test. Do you care enough about innovation to get some outside help, and therefore you're open to that help? So, that's certainly important. We then need to be sure that the senior leadership team, or the exec team, is on board with innovation. They're not just paying lip service to it, and we do that through discussions, and seeing how they're talking about innovation. What they've done so far. If we find that the CEO, or the managing director is- we don't really think that they have innovation, or they're not really behind it. Then we generally opt out because we just know that we can't do our best work if innovation is not supported from the top.

What are the warnings?

Yeah?

So, what are the warning signs that tell you that's the case?

It's obvious things in conversation, but then it's like potentially like not understanding body language, not understanding innovation the way they're talk about it, but it's also subtle things as well. Like if we've got a meeting scheduled where we're due to meet with the CEO, or the managing director, and perhaps a couple from the innovation team. If the CEO decides not to turn up to the meeting, you go it's not a priority, or if the meetings get bumped a lot of times we go, "It's a bit of a trip wire, clearly this is not a priority for them." So, it's the obvious things that you see in the meeting, but then it's also the stuff that, I guess, is the more subtle things that you just go yeah, I'm guessing you're talking about innovation, but you're not really prioritizing it, and at that stage where you're just politely opt out.

Yeah, absolutely. How important is purpose? You touched on it in leadership cohesion, but I'm curious. If the conversation with the CEO is all around profit, and there isn't necessarily a longer term more sustainable in the broader sense purpose behind the company? Is that a warning sign, or is that a challenge?

For us it would probably indicate that it's not going to be the best fit with our values. So, one of our company values is do good not evil, and it definitely dictates who we work with, and while a lot of our clients are publicly listed companies, and financial results are important. If we don't believe in what the company is doing, then we're not going to work with them. For example, we have a blanket rule where we don't work with any companies in the tobacco, or gambling industries, and certainly we get approached by quite a few, and for us we just think it's not a good fit for us. We don't want to be helping innovate cigarettes. Things that kill people, and we don't want to be innovating the gambling industry. Helping people potentially destroy their lives. So, it's really important, and earlier this year we recently became accredited as a [B corporation](#), which for us as a business, we absolutely prioritize purpose over profits as [B corporations](#) do, and if our clients are not really fitting that mold then it's just not a good fit for anyone. We're not going to be excited to do work with them. So, best that they work with someone else.

Fair enough, yeah. So Amantha, you've very kindly offered to make available to our listeners a free chapter from the book, which covers the, which has the innovation ordered in it, which guides individuals through the 14, or self-assessment essentially, across these 14 key strategies or criteria. So, we'll include that in the show notes, but any comment to encourage people to use any guidance as to how they should use it? How should they think about it as they're going through? I know there are instructions there, but perhaps you could just frame that particular tool before we begin to wrap up the conversation?

Of course, the book itself covers 14 different variables if you like. There are things that really contribute to creating a cultural way innovation thrives, and if I was to say that you'd like just go out tomorrow, and focus on these 14 things. That's pretty overwhelming. So, instead a good way to approach the book, and to do before you start getting into all the chapters is work through this innovation culture ordered, and it'll probably only take you 10 or 15 minutes to work through the questions. It's not too arduous, and once you've done that there's a guide to score your answers, and that will help you prioritize where you need to be focusing your innovation efforts. So, you can then prioritize the chapters that you read, and the recommendations that you implement based on what's actually happening at your organization. So, eventually you can personalize the book. I guess it's like a choose your own invention, but for innovation, culture in terms of how you start to apply the findings, and where you focus your efforts to get the biggest bang for your buck. So, it's very straightforward, but it will help you work out where to focus your innovation efforts.



Yeah, and I think it's probably worth saying this is not just for someone who's running an innovation project, or program, but also maybe for a frustrated intrapreneur who's wondering whether they're playing- whether they're in the right organization, or whether they're on the right project, or whether they're doing things correctly. So, you can look at it from a couple of different angles I suspect.

Absolutely, I think it's really perfect fit for intrapreneurs, and when I was writing the book I didn't want it to just be for managers or leaders. I thought it was really important that if you're an individual that doesn't necessarily have control over how your organization is ran. Even how your team, or department is ran, or what if there is to be some really actionable research, and case studies, and recommendations for really anyone? So, particular those first few chapters that focus on the individual, and then there's also some around the team I think are really valuable if you don't have control over how your organization is run, but you are kind of a hungry intrapreneur that does want to make a difference. There's definitely stuff that you can do that will make a difference.

Yeah, that's wonderful to make that point because essentially that's the heart of this Innovation Ecosystem program, to empower individuals as well as leaders to actually take control, and take steps forward towards raising them game, or making their projects happen more quickly. More successfully, so yeah it's great that you made that point. So, just beginning to wrap this up. This is Mark Bidwell just closing up the conversation with Amantha Imber. So Amantha, I sent three questions across to you a few days ago, and I wonder if I can just get your views, or your answers to them. So, the first question is what have you changed your mind about recently?

That was a really hard one to answer. I think the most immediate example because I've got a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter at home who is constantly exposed to other sick kids. I've had a really bad winter such as the end of winter in Australia. I feel like I've had a few colds, and normally my attitude when I'm sick is to just push on, but in recent weeks I'm just at the tail end of a cold now is that I decided no. I think I'm going to stop trying to push on when I'm sick, and that's something that I have recently changed my mind about, which certainly help me get over this particular cold a bit more quickly.

Well, and recovery, and resilience. These are things that if we are achievement oriented individuals we tend to downplay, but one of our previous guests. A guy called Scott Peltin talked very, very eloquently about how he worked with senior managers to help them recover from big events, but also from minor sicknesses, or illnesses which can really slow you down, but normally you charge through them. So, yeah that's – I'm glad that you've learned that lesson. That'll pay enormous dividends. Second question. What do you do to remain creative, and innovative?

So, something – we talk about to our clients a lot is just the power of the unconscious mind, and essentially you activate your unconscious mind when you stop thinking about the thing that you're thinking about, the problem that you're trying to solve. Quite often when I'm going to tackling it a bit of a tricky juicy kind of problem is I'm going to put it to the back of my mind, and I'll deliberately do things where I'm distracted with something else like whether it be going for a run, and listening to a podcast on a completely unrelated topic, or going for a walk and listening to music, or something like that. I'm putting myself in those situations where I'm focusing on something else, but I know that when I'm in those situations that's when these unexpected ideas come to mind. So, often just set problems in the back of my mind. Do activities that are unrelated, and very often I'll find that's where I'll come up with my best ideas. So, I do that a lot, and I sleep on it a lot as well. So, I find that when you wake up fresh in the morning there's always a new perspective to be found. So, there are a couple of things that I'll regularly do.

Brilliant, brilliant, and then the third question. To what do you attribute to your success in life?

I think a couple of things. Firstly, I get told by my team that I'm the most efficient person that they've met. I find that I can do things, and think through things very, very quickly, and I think that given we've all got the same amount of hours in a day, and particularly when you're apparent those hours condense immensely. I think being able to work three things, and think through things quickly has served me really well. I think the other thing that has served me really well is just – I think I'm quite optimistic in nature. I think that's how I've been programmed. Obviously, we can learn how to be optimistic, but I wake up like most mornings being really excited to start the day, and wondering I wonder what's ahead? It's going to be a good day. That's my mindset. Not forced, just naturally, and I think again that served me really well in just finding excitement in lots of different things.

Wonderful, wonderful. Well Amantha, it's been great talking to you. Where can people- in the show notes where it's linked to the book. We've obviously got the download as well, but where can people get in touch with you?



If you go to the [Inventium](#) website, which is Invent with an I-U-M for Mary on the end .com.au, or just put Inventium into Google, and you'll probably find us, and I'm on Twitter. I'm just @Amantha. I was one of the lucky few people in the world that just had their first name as their Twitter handle. So, there you go.

Wonderful, well we'll put that in the show notes as well. It's been a great pleasure having you on the show. I really enjoyed reading the book, and our conversation, and I'm sure that our audience enjoyed it as much as I did. So, thanks very much indeed for your time today Amantha.

Thanks for having me Mark.

Bye.

Bye.

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