

# Liisa Valikangas

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## The Future of Innovation

Travelling to places many people do not commonly go to makes her perceptive of new, creative ideas. Reading books a bit farther away from her field inspires her. Following current happenings in the world gives her the capacity to imagine things that are not yet visible. The well-known author, consultant and professor of innovation management, Liisa Valikangas, is always looking for something innovative to create a more liveable future.



## Variety is the essence of innovation. And variety needs to be constantly, intentionally cultivated.

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**Organizations are constantly developing efficient ways to find new ideas and business opportunities. Based on your experience, what is new in the field of innovation?**

Liisa: I believe there are some interesting new methodologies for innovation development like game platforms that allow several thousands of people to collaborate toward a common goal. What is unique, is the ability to harness so many people's ideas and energies. There is also an increasing understanding in companies that innovation is not some kind of separate department but an organizational capability that requires company-wide imagination and intrapreneuring. I was also intrigued by a book by Beatrice K. Otto that discussed the role of jesters in courts. It appears, a jester-like institution may be crucial to allow for humor and playfulness to thrive in organizations. This benefits innovation as any innovative idea is non-linear.

**Game platforms? How do they work exactly?**

Liisa: Take for example Superstruct ([www.superstruct-game.org](http://www.superstruct-game.org)), which was a massive multiplayer game, created by the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, CA. Some 7,000 people played the game trying to address the imaginary but real-feeling »superthreats« bringing the world to an end in a few decades. The purpose of such alternative reality games is to think through different scenarios and collaborate to address the emerging issues. Imagine, thousands of volunteers as a resource for your organization to shape your future!

**Some organizations have too many ideas, but no proper ways to develop them into innovations. What main changes or developments do you see in innovation processes in the near future?**

Liisa: Innovation processes need to focus on enablement – how to support the development of innovative ideas. Often innovation processes are centered on assessment when they really should be helping the team to improve the idea, combine it with other ideas and develop a business plan around it. In most organizations there are too many people who opine on the quality of ideas, and too few who actually improve upon them. One approach would be to let the concept grow outside the company for a while to see if it works and then absorb it back once it has gained some strength of its own. Of course, then it is important to allow the idea to impact the business model and operations of the company, otherwise it will be squashed.

**Finland has quite a good reputation in terms of new innovations. Having worked in countries like Finland, USA, Switzerland and Japan among others, must have given you a strong perspective to evaluate cultural differences. How do you see these differences in innovation management when you compare Finland and USA, for example?**

Liisa: Well, there are many interesting differences, I encountered when I came back to Finland after living 12 years in California. For example, thinking and playing with ideas or getting excited about them is not commonplace here. In Finland people do not know how to use novel concepts as a currency for discussion like they do in Silicon Valley. There, the best ideas compete against each other. They are evaluated from the perspective, the more radical the more promising; and are dropped easily when they fail to work. In Finland, the person presenting an idea takes a risk in speaking out about it. In general, the idea is too tightly coupled with its presenter rather than considered as an opportunity to explore and imagine possible, alternative futures,

which is what ideas are really efficient for. They are cheap and easy to discard when they do not work. Yet, ideas in combination with other ideas are a fantastic way to imagine what might become possible – one day.

**Can you as innovation consultant see any changes in your job's role in the future?**

Liisa: I think companies' innovation capabilities are maturing fast, and innovation may be one of those areas that are no longer considered separate. Like quality, it is just one of the focus areas that managers need to balance. However, organizations naturally migrate towards a certain way of operating, which tends to drive out innovation. Thus, there is always a need for innovation reminders.

**You have recently written a book called: »The Resilient Organization« What do you wish for anyone who is in a leading innovative role, to learn from this book?**

Liisa: I have collected what I have learnt from strategic resilience and innovation for the past 20 years and reflected on it. The most important lesson is to continuously develop new options, avenues, pathways, ideas. Only movement makes movement possible. Rehearsing change is very important. If change is not rehearsed, the ability to change will disappear. Like muscles: if you do not go to the gym, you won't be in shape. When the tiger is on your tail, it is too late to learn to run.

**You have also established Innovation Democracy, Inc., a non-profit organization which is mainly operating in developing countries. Liisa, what is Innovation Democracy, Inc. and what does it do?**

Liisa: It is a group of dedicated volunteers who seek to support innovative entrepreneurship in countries important to world stability. We work with graduating students and help them create a future for themselves, for example, start a company. We also work with companies originating from emerging markets that we can learn from and who can in turn learn from our knowledge in strategy, innovation and leadership. My trip to East Africa recently, was related to the activities of Innovation Democracy. This is one way for me to get new insights and share what I have learned too. ●



Jarno Poskela, senior partner at Innotiimi, ICG's Nordic partner and an international consulting company with roots in Finland. Innotiimi employees 50 consultants working in seven European countries. For 28 years Innotiimi has helped its customers to develop in areas such as innovation, change, leadership, team building and well-being.

I got to know Liisa when I was working at Stanford University. Last time I met her at the FEI (Front End of Innovation) Conference in Helsinki in October 2011 when she gave a very inspiring presentation about new trends in innovation management.

Dr. Liisa Valikangas, Professor of Innovation Management at Aalto University, Finland, specializes in innovation, strategy and global change. She has worked at IMD in Switzerland, editing the World Competitiveness Report, and studied leadership and organizational change at Keio Graduate School of Business in Japan. After her Ph.D. at Tampere University in Finland on leading change, she was a post-doc at Stanford University in the USA, focusing on organizational learning. She is a co-founder of Innovation Democracy, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing innovative entrepreneurship in countries important to world stability ([www.innodemo.com](http://www.innodemo.com)). She has published in journals such as Harvard Business Review and MIT Sloan Management Review. She regularly teaches in executive education programs.

#### Buchtip

»The Resilient Organization – How Adaptive Companies Thrive Even When Strategy Fails« (MacGraw-Hill, 2010)



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