

Fostering a culture of innovation

Experimentation and failure are not new concepts that are unique in startup culture, we spoke with Sheona Barlow of W. L. Gore & Associates (the makers of Gore-Tex) about how a deep-rooted focus on company culture and innovation can lead to generations of success.

I recognise that I'm unusual in that I've only ever worked for one business my entire life. I started as the receptionist at W.L. Gore & Associates Dundee plant in May 1986 and during my 34 years at Gore I've worked across sales, engineering and manufacturing before taking up my post as Plant Leader.

What's kept me at Gore for so long? It has a really unique culture. In many ways, it behaves as though it's still a startup even though it is now over sixty years old. Gore is often used as a case study by Harvard Business School, and I do genuinely think there's a lot people can learn about culture of innovation and scaling a business from Gore.

Gore is a materials science business. We make diverse materials from polymers that change lives. We protect explorers atop the world's highest peaks with our GORE-TEX fabric, our cables travel deep into space to enable new discoveries and our medical devices work inside the human body to save lives. These diverse products and more are all made possible by a discovery fifty years ago in a moment of frustration. The story typifies the restless curiosity and tenacity that is inherent within Gore:

It was actually Bob Gore, the son of Gore's founders, that made the discovery

of expanded PTFE late one night. He was trying to heat and stretch one of our polymers but was getting nowhere. Just as he was about to give up, he yanked the material in frustration and it unexpectedly expanded the full length of his outstretched arms. Bob instantly recognised that this new expanded material could solve a wide range of problems. Overnight our business was transformed as we discovered new markets and opportunities for this versatile material.

I'm sure many entrepreneurs and inventors will relate to this story of discovery. Just when you're about to give up, something unexpected happens that transforms your business. At Gore, we encourage experimentation and failure. There's so much to be learned by failure, by *why* things don't work. We allocate a significant percentage of the technical team's time to what we call "dabble time." This is where the technical team are encouraged to be creative with our technologies, outside of any assigned projects.

Through this experimentation, we've created bagpipe bags (we are in Scotland, after all!), dental floss and guitar strings. Once an individual generates a product concept they can present it to the business and gain approval to build a team around them and investigate it further. Certain concepts tend to generate a lot of momentum and support, making Gore's employees really invested in success.

What makes Gore distinct from most conventional businesses is our structure and culture. We have a "lattice" organisational structure that pays little regard towards titles and hierarchy, although we do have Leaders for accountability. We refer to all staff, even our CEO, as an "Associate."

This signifies mutual respect and also points to the fact that all Associates have equity ownership through our Associate Stock Ownership Plan. And our business is known as an "Enterprise", founded on beliefs and principles inspired by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and McGregor's X Y Theory.

In 1958 it must have been considered slightly radical creating this new management style, but in truth what is radical is that we've been true to this vision for sixty years and grown it at an impressive scale. Gore now has 10,500 Associates based in 25 countries.

An integral part of our success is size. Our founder Bill Gore intentionally decided to cap the size of each facility at 150 people. This hasn't always been practical, but it's still the ideal that we aim to work towards. The theory behind this is that 150 is the optimal number for everyone to know everyone.

This then creates a sense of connection and increases individual commitment to the group's goals. Above 150 Bill found that "things get clumsy." So whilst we're big, we're also small. Hence our nickname as a "middle-aged start-up."

Life at Gore doesn't work for everyone. History has shown that you either join and stay for years (look at me!) or realise pretty quickly that it's not right for you. It's a culture in which highly motivated people thrive. They love to problem-solve and collaborate, but some people need more structure and can't cope with the ambiguity.

We're not perfect and we don't get everything right. As an Enterprise that is global and big at the same time as being small, we've been challenged by digital transformation. Communication and decision making can also be a problem in our world without hierarchies.

But one thing we get right is innovation. We even opened an Innovation Centre recently in the States where 'Gore meets Silicon Valley'. It's a hub for generating ideas and prototyping. It signifies that the culture of innovation is at the heart of our Enterprise. Innovation allows us to push boundaries, transform industries and improve lives.

Sheona Barlow is the Plant Leader for Dundee at W. L. Gore & Associates (UK) Limited. Gore is a global materials science company dedicated to transforming industries and improving lives. To discover more about Gore visit [Gore.com](https://www.gore.com)

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