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10 Surefire Ways to Destroy Innovative Thinking

With all the upcoming leadership events and keynotes that I have on my schedule, I'm on a pretty constant stream of planning conference calls.

As I dig into the culture and attitude of a client through interviews with the CEO and other team members, I'm always mystified to find that some organizations just seem to do everything they can to shut down new ideas. Here are some points to consider to find out if your company is on the way to killing innovation.

There are a few key mistakes that organizations make when it comes to innovation. Do these sound familiar?

- 1. Form a Committee.** An absolute surefire way of shutting down ideas! The herd mentality takes over, and activity sclerosis soon sets in.
- 2. Defer Decisions.** It's easier to wait than to make any bold, aggressive moves. Uncertainty is a virtue; indecision is an asset.
- 3. Hide Failure.** If anyone tries something new and doesn't succeed, make sure that no one else sees it. You don't want to set a message that it is important to take risks.
- 4. Let Innovators Work in Secret.** You want to make sure that the concept of innovation remains some deep, mysterious process that not everyone can participate in. That will help to ensure that most of your team doesn't pursue any type of fresh new thinking. They'll just keep doing what they've always done.

5. **Banish Fear.** Make sure that everyone thinks that everything is going to be all right. You don't have to deal with potential business market disruption, new competitors, significant industry transformation, or the impact of globalization. Everything will look the same 10 years from now, so just keep everyone focused on doing the same old thing!
6. **Accept the Status Quo.** Things are running perfectly, you've got the perfect product mix, and all of your customers are thrilled with your brand and the levels of customer service. There's no need to do anything new since it's all going to work out just fine!
7. **Be Cautious.** Don't make any bold, aggressive moves. Just take things slowly, one step at a time. If you move too fast, things are likely to go wrong. Let complacency settle in like a warm blanket.
8. **Glorify Process.** Make sure that everything is filled out in triplicate; be sure process slows down any radical ideas. It's more important to do things perfectly than to make mistakes.
9. **Be Narrow.** Keep a very tiny view of the future. You can't succeed with any big wins, because there aren't going to be any dramatic surprises in the future. Think small. Act accordingly.
10. **Study Things to Death.** Don't let any uncertainty creep into your decision-making process. Make sure that if you are to do anything, that you've spent sufficient time and effort to understand all the variables. Your goal is ensuring that any decision is free of risk, unlikely to fail, and in retrospect will be carefully and fully documented.

And there are certainly more attitudes that help destroy innovative thinking. What do you think? What are the other attitudes and ways of thinking that manage to shut down organizational idea machines?

Are You in an Innovation Rut?

Find out! Take the list below to your next meeting. Score one point each time a phrase is used, plus bonus points as indicated. If your total is more than 5, you've got an organization that is innovation-averse. Score 10 or more, and you are innovation-dead. If you get 15 or more, you might as well close up shop.

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result each time.

— Albert Einstein

- "We've always done it this way." (3 bonus points)
- "It won't work."
- "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."
- "That's not my problem."
- "You can't do that."
- "I don't know how."
- "I don't think I can."
- "I didn't know that."
- "The boss won't go for it." (5 bonus points)
- "Why should I care?" (10 bonus points)]

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10 Signs that You've Got an Innovation Dysfunction

- People laugh at new ideas.
- Someone who identifies a problem is shunned.
- Innovation is the privileged practice of a special group.
- The phrase, "You can't do that because we've always done it this way" is used for every new idea.
- No one can remember the last time anyone did anything really cool.
- People think innovation is about R&D.
- People have convinced themselves that competing on price is normal.
- The organization is focused more on process than success.
- There are lots of Baby Boomers around, and few people younger than 25.
- After any type of surprise — product, market, industry, or organizational change — everyone sits back and asks, "Wow, where did that come from?"

Innovative Companies Act Differently

So how do innovative organizations differ? In these organizations:

- Ideas flow freely throughout the organization.
- Subversion is a virtue.
- Success and failure are championed.
- There are many leaders who encourage innovative thinking — not just managers who run a bureaucracy.
- There are creative champions throughout the organization — people who thrive on thinking about how to do things differently.
- Ideas get approval and endorsement.
- Rather than stating, "It can't be done," people ask, "How could we do this?"
- People know that in addition to R&D, innovation is also about ideas for how to run the business better, grow the business, and transform the business.
- The word "innovation" is found in most job descriptions as a primary area of responsibility, and a percentage of annual remuneration is based on achievement of explicitly defined innovation goals.

The fact is that every organization should be able to develop innovation as a core virtue. If they aren't doing that, they certainly won't survive the rapid rate of change that envelops us today. 🌱

Jim Carroll is a leading international futurist, trends and innovation expert, with a client list that ranges from Northrop Grumman to the Walt Disney Organization. For more information, go to www.jimcarroll.com.