

# What Kills Innovation

## Killing Innovation Culture

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*“No Single Rain Drop believes it is to blame for the flood”*

**Abstract** – Present paper elaborates on different areas of opposition that is facing innovation and creativity in an organization. The innovation killers, enemies and traps are found in literature and theories of innovation and by the authors own observations. The paper concludes with a summary of the most urgent and likely killers of innovation in SMEs.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to uncover possible killers of innovation and creativity in organizations in general and in SMEs specifically. It is important for organizations to be conscious about these killers, enemies and traps off innovation. This paper will disclose what could be suppressing creativity and the innovation culture in many SMEs.

#### 1.1 Importance of creativity

Creativity in all areas of the organization is important to have successful innovations, today it is not up to some R&D department to innovate only, actually the most 'popular' innovations today are often not traditional new product developments, world-class innovations today most often innovates on several areas at the same time. Here are two examples:

Many hail the iPod as great innovation, but actually there is not much innovative about the device, it's certainly not disruptive in any way. It's an incremental development in the lines of portable music players: Walkman, Discman, Mini Disc, MP3 player, Walkman Phones. The iPod device enabled the success of iTunes as Apples tool for music distribution, which has been disruptive to the music industry as Apple now from out of nowhere is among the world's largest music distributor.

UPS recently developed new software for route planning, normal route planners would optimize for route distances, but the new UPS planner incorporated priority to avoid left turns in the routes. The creative ideas is to avoid the stopping for left turns, waiting for traffic in left turns and avoiding the higher level of accidents in left turns compared to the right counterpart. Note: In USA right turns can be taken even at red lights. Putting this software to use in the first year saved 28 million miles and 3 million gallons of fuel.

Suppressing creativity in an organization will dry out the company's sources of innovation; this paper stands as warnings of which suppressors, killer, enemies and traps that could show up when attempting new efforts on innovation in SMEs:

The paper is structured as follows:

Section 2 uncovers how leaders and managers have influence on the climate for creativity and innovation.

Section 3 elaborates on the importance of working in diverse teams to support creativity and innovation.

Section 4 explores classic mistakes in organizations when focusing on innovation with out learning from past experiences.

Section 5 explains 10 major enemies of ideas and innovation.

Section 6 is about how organizational growth and development affects the innovation culture.

### 2 KILLING CREATIVITY

Parts of this section are also available in Sørensen, J. (2008e), where it is presented together with the KEYS framework for actually measuring the creative climate of an organization.

This section is a short study of the findings Amabile, T. M. (1998), has put forward on how to kill creativity. Management most often suppress the innovation and creative culture unintentional by prioritizing coordination, productivity and control while putting less priority towards supporting innovation by motivation, rewards and by the way work is assigned to people.

#### Business creativity

Creativity in a business sense is measured by the usability of the idea generated and not so much by the radicalism of the idea. Managers tend to consider creativity as being linked only to the way employees think and thus how they solve problems. Amabile, T. M. (1998) has found that this is only one of three major parts that support creativity in the staff: Creative-thinking skills, Motivation and Expertise, this is illustrated in the figure below, (Amabile, T. M., 1998).



**Expertise** of a person is everything that he or she knows and is capable of achieving within areas relevant to his or her work. In a sense it is the person's capability to explore and solve problems.

**Creative thinking** is the way we approach our problems and their solutions. It is about getting new ideas and combining existing ideas in new ways and uses these in solving problems. Masters of this often turns problems upside down and looks out side of 'the box' to find the better ways of solving the problem.

**The motivation** factor will determine the priorities of the employees, one can state that: You get what you measure. Motivation can be parted in two: Extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic being motivation outside of the person, most often this involve some kind of payment related to success of solving a specific problem.

Intrinsic motivation is evidently that with most influence on the creativity of the organization. Intrinsic motivation is from within a person e.g. passion, interest and desire to perfect the problem solving. When people are intrinsic motivated their work itself will be enjoyable and motivating. Both types of motivation are studied further in Sørensen, J. (2008d).

Amabile, T. M. (1998) elaborates on 6 of the main management practices that either if done wrong or right kills or supports innovation. In the following the six categories of what mangers can do to support creativity is presented.

### **Challenge**

To have rich and detailed information of employees and the available problems to be solved is crucial to set the right challenges for the employees. When tasks and employees are matched properly, the employees will feel an increase in intrinsic motivation.

### **Freedom**

Freedom is the autonomy granted to employees to select means, tool, processes and structures but typical not the outcome. Good managers should spend majority of time on setting perfectly clear goals and let the team decide how to get there. Freedom in how you approach your work will increase the intrinsic motivation.

### **Resources**

Supplying just the right amount of time and money to a team or a project will support creativity, where as both too much and too little of each will discourage creativity. Fake and impossible tight deadlines often kill creativity in organizations, open and honest planning which applies just the right amount of pressure is desirable. Also funding and resources allocated to the project must be just right, too little and the team will fail and intrinsic motivation seizes to exist.

### **Work-Group Features**

Creative teams are mutually supportive and created from people with diverse background and perspectives. The diversity can be in intellectual foundations, approaches to work or thinking style. Respecting the knowledge and perspective of others within the team is a key for intrinsic motivation to thrive. If instead homogeneous teams are assembled, everybody will meet up with the same mind-set and they will be leaving with the usual solutions and mind-sets.

### **Supervisory Encouragement**

It is important, for intrinsic motivation in teams and individuals, that they feel that their work matters. Here it is important that managers searches for way to explore the team's new ideas, opposite of searching for reasons not to use the new ideas. Motivation of teams and individuals is properly one of the hardest leadership skills to perfect.

### **Organizational Support**

The organizations leaders must prioritize and encourage innovation, this must be communicated when ever possible and it should be included in strategy, measurements and rewards. It is up to the leaders of the organization to ensure appropriate systems and processes for supporting innovation, together with enabling and supporting information sharing and collaboration.

## **3 INNOVATIVE TEAMS**

The most innovative teams are diverse teams; the teams must be able to combine divergent areas to truly innovate, (Anderson, C. & Fryer, B., 2003). An example could be teams that have been deeply involved in investigating technology and new technology possible products, without a broader attention to whether the technologies would actual satisfy an existing need.

To be able to put together diverse team, the employers must hire for diversity, while most companies tend to hire people that would fit in and get along with the existing staff, (Anderson, C. & Fryer, B., 2003). Homogeneous teams will not spark any divergent connection, which will be a hindrance for breakthrough innovation, (Anderson, C. & Fryer, B., 2003).

#### 4 ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION TRAPS

Kanter, R. M. (2006) claims that innovation resurfaces in a wave like behavior in most organization and when innovation emerges as top priority the organization seems to have forgotten mistakes that was made last time innovation was hot.

To counter measure this behavior, Kanter, R. M. (2006) puts forward the four most classical mistakes of innovation:

##### **Strategy Mistakes: Hurdles Too High, Scope Too Narrow**

Most organizations sets out looking for radical blockbuster innovations, but these are very rare and unpredictable, and in this process opportunities that, at a glance, looks small will be rejected. Adding a screening process based on market research and former experiences tend to rule out any real innovative ideas. Together with the above two items most companies also tend to focus on product innovation alone and thus they are not investigating innovation in production and marketing of the products.

The successful innovators recognize that to achieve more successful innovations one must risk more failures.

Kanter, R. M. (2006) suggests the following improvements to avoid the Strategy Mistakes: Implement a 3 steps pyramid strategy to innovation, the top step being a few very serious and high bet innovations, which will receive the largest part of innovation funding. The middle step holds a number of promising ideas, where teams are still working on improving the ideas. The bottom of the pyramid is build of unexamined ideas and incremental innovation that do not require too much research to validate. Activities should be secured on all levels at any given time, and everybody should be allowed to participate to make the innovation culture flourish.

The organization will archive bigger innovation if all small and big ideas are processed through a funnel, (Kanter, R. M., 2006).

The Strategy Mistakes are very likely to be made by the organization, if we do not carefully circumnavigate them. Due to the pressure from i.e. the financial situation and focus on turn-case projects, companies are most certainly looking for a blockbuster innovation but it has to be recognizable as obviously profitable to get funding.

##### **Process Mistakes: Controls Too Tight**

Processes in the exploitative part of the organization are often linked with tight controls, performance measures, checklists, QA policies, reviews and certification programs. Innovation processes have large uncertainties and will often sidetrack to unexpected results, where true innovation is to be found. This process is likely to be strangled if the control from the exploitative processes is applied.

Kanter, R. M. (2006) suggests the following countermeasures to avoid strangling innovation by control systems. The company should reserve special funds for innovation and unexpected opportunities, this important for avoiding that innovative idea have to wait for next years budget and innovators would not need to beg for funds in different areas of the organization to ensure progress of the innovation.

All bureaucratic rules should be neglected in innovation projects; the team needs to be able to follow the rhythm of the project allowing for fast prototyping and series of fast trial, while not being blocked by required gateway meetings and reviews.

##### **Structure Mistakes: Connections Too Loose, Separations Too Sharp**

When separating the exploitative and the exploratory parts of the organization one have to carefully consider effects on communication and culture, as most often the creativity needed for successful innovation is spread across the entire organization. Cooperation on innovations and creative new ideas can be limited if walls are build to high between the units. This is necessary to avoid the development of the picture that one unit has all the fun and the other units make all the money.

The seek of balancing between exploiting, to get the highest returns from existing activities, and exploring, seeking new innovations, require flexibility and attention to relationships in the organization. Human connection between the exploratory unit and the rest of the organization must be tightened, and the communication level must be high and frequently, this should be the responsibility of each innovation project team and the unit as whole.

##### **Skills Mistakes: Leadership Too Weak, Communication Too Poor**

Companies often assign the best technical managers to steer innovation instead of selecting the best leaders for the job. Technical managers is often of the opinion that good ideas will speak for them selves and thus communication will be lagging and they will often weight tasks instead of relationships, which can lead to missed opportunities to enhance chemistry and diversity in the innovation teams.

To avoid this, innovation managers should be selected for leadership and interpersonal skills, to help create a supportive culture of collaboration around the innovation teams.

#### 5 ENEMIES OF IDEAS AND INNOVATION

Allison, K. (2005) presents 10 enemies of innovation, which innovators should be able to recognize when they appear:

- Fear of how I'll look.
- Fixed vs. fluid point of view.

- Logic vs. energy.
- Same action only Harder.
- Addiction to answers.
- Be serious.
- Relying only on experience.
- Not my job.
- Avoiding friction.
- No time.

### **Fear of how I'll look**

People fear how they will look to someone else, this is hard to admit to and thus this enemy is always well hidden. The fear is typically of being judged, of looking stupid, of being wrong, of failing or of having to take the blame. This could very well be an issue when setting teams for working on radically new ideas and when doing brainstorming in smaller or larger groups. Speaking up about ideas that are new, unproven or seems silly at first can make you lose face when discussing with people, especially when they are from same skill area as one self, no body wants to look stupid.

### **Fixed vs. fluid point of view**

Having a fluid point of view is important for being able to see new solutions, unfortunately at any given time humans only have a visual perspective of 180 degrees, so we need to turn to be able to see the rest of the world. This will be major challenge when utilizing short term focused sales and operational employees for spawning new innovations. When heavily loaded with work, and being in a constant sense of being behind, we tend to focus at operational tasks at hand.

### **Logic vs. energy**

In idea screening and also in regular meetings people tend to listen for logical ideas, ideas that are understood completely when presented. Ideas with real energy behind can often be recognized that there will be some kind of surprised response from the crowd. Radical new ideas will create an immediate response in the crowd it is presented to. When designing a new process for idea screening it should take care not to screen for logic only.

### **Same action only Harder**

Thinking that, to improve, we need to do what we do today, but just harder, is a serious enemy of innovation. People who prefer more of the status quo will tend to put a minimum of effort into work on making the organization succeed with innovation. To get real breakthrough ideas one need to start by doing something different to 'trigger' the new ideas. People need to get out of their usual context to be able to find creative solutions to the problems that they are hammering away on.

### **Addiction to answers**

Since childhood we all have been taught to be looking for answers, the entire school system is build by asking questions and expecting the students to

answer. Focusing merely on answers leaves no room for wondering about the question, what are they really? And why are exactly these questions posted? If we are not willing to try something out without having all the answers before hand, we will fail in innovation of radical new ideas.

### **Be serious**

When the stakes are high, pressure increases we tend to become more serious, and especially after a long period of pressure we both as individuals and as an organization develops tunnel vision. Under the crushing weight of high stakes, pressure, seriousness and tunnel vision neither good ideas nor good decisions will flourish.

### **Relying only on experience**

Can we create new ideas if we relay on what we understand and how we judge ideas today? Or will this lead us to only incremental changes of what we already got?

### **Not my job**

Most employees feel that creativity is not their job, and they even feel that they are not very creative. For an innovative culture to flourish everybody must join in taking risk and speaking out loud about their ideas.

### **Avoiding friction**

Proposing new ideas will generate friction, the energy from friction should be used to improve the idea, opposite of used to kill the idea. Do not ever explain why an idea is not usable and should be rejected, instead ask the idea generator to help brainstorm on how potential obstacles to the idea can be solved. Process people are focused on closing open action items or issues, which is a likely but, devastating approach to innovation, if the idea is not obvious to the screening team currently it might be next time or next year, of already now if more work was put into communicating and shaping the idea.

### **No time**

There is always too little time, which is critical when ex. calling meeting and workshop for collaboration on innovation and new ideas. When everybody have "No time" we do not even use 5 minutes on setting context or getting in the right mood for brainstorming, but we tend to get right to the core of the workshop. When the workshop finally builds momentum and the speed of new ideas pick up, it is important to avoid disturbances such as people joining in late, people barge in with messages, phone, laptops etc. In practice this would mean that critical brainstorming should be done off-site and it might be clever to book at least an entire day, so people are not occupied with what they need to catch up when they get back to the desk. In the long run it is desired to have innovation culture in our everyday lives, so at some point this must be solved, by allocating freedom and time for persons own disposition.

## 6 ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In experience from several companies it seems that company growth and structural changes, if not handled with the outmost care, can strangle innovation and creativity in an organization. Often bureaucratic systems and increased control follows the growth in companies which both are harmful to the original entrepreneurial spirit of the company.

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