



# Are YOU killing the creativity in your company?

By Nancy L. Clark



Now more than ever our organizations need new ideas, new approaches, and a re-commitment to America's entrepreneurial drive. As leaders, we need to cultivate it--not kill it! Innovation does not simply occur just because we hired innovators or spent money on creating an innovation room. It is much more than that--we need to find it, support it, protect it, and develop it—not kill it.

As a management consultant with more years than I am willing to admit, I continue to be astonished by the innovation killers that thrive in many, if not most, organizations. A majority of these “innovation murders” are committed unintentionally. Regardless, the result is the same—ideas are slaughtered and creativity retreats to the organizational underground.

The good news is that your organization is likely brimming with creative ideas...unfortunately, you and/or your managers may be inadvertently suppressing the creativity. Given today's economic environment, you can ill afford to limit thinking or new ideas. If your company's creative “spigot” is not open and flowing freely, why not? And, what is it costing you? The answers may surprise you.

We have found that many leaders close the spigot unknowingly--by not recognizing innovation and innovators. Some leaders allow their egos or impatience to crush new ideas. Whether you are the leader of a global enterprise or the owner of a small local company, there are things you can do to open the spigot in order to stimulate your company and generate new business...

## 1. Recognize the Various Flavors of Innovation

Different types of innovators are better at different types of innovation. As the organization's leader, you need to be aware of the factors to consider and recognize what type of innovation you need for a particular situation.

Indicators that you have the right innovator for the specific job:

- Interest: Does this person have a clear interest for the specific area?
- Expertise: Does the person have the needed level of expertise needed? Sometimes little or no expertise is helpful so that s/he is not weighed down with conventional baggage.
- Innovative aptitude: Does this person have the right innovative aptitude for the job? How does this person approach or address the situation? Is that what you need? Or are you setting him/her up for failure? Innovative aptitude is basically someone's behavioral approach to creative thinking. Below are a few examples of innovative aptitude questions to ask yourself and some clues that might indicate you found the right innovative aptitude for a specific need:
  - **Breakthrough Product:** Does this person think out-of-the-box? Is s/he not confined by boundaries and is able to free his/her creativity?
    - Clues/indicators: Enjoys freedom, resists structure (deadlines, boundaries), risk taker, willing to try new ideas with little data/proof, possibly irreverent, positive, optimistic

- **Process Improvement:** Does this person understand the whole? Does s/he think systemically and can s/he break down the pieces logically and methodically?
    - Clues/indicators: Thinks about the future, wants to know the goals or where the organization is headed; thinks/asks questions about the bigger picture; conceptual. May appear calmer or slower paced; does not get rattled; approaches his/her day in a logical process fashion; may depend upon lists to keep organized; does not appreciate changing priorities or chaotic environments.
  - **Change Management:** Does this person connect to and understand people? Driving change in an organization is about people, and change managers need to be able to work and build trust with others while also being authoritative.
    - Clues/indicators: Easily engages with people; builds trust/rapport; optimistic and enthusiastic; positive; strategic focus; action oriented; tries to control/influence people and events; offer opinions; willing/able to discuss difficult topics, unafraid to spar verbally.
  - **Launch/Expand Business Development Effort:** Assuming you have a consultative or relationship based service,\* does this person build broad and deep networks? Does s/he connect quickly to people/read people well? Is s/he focused on results?
    - Clues/indicators: Fast paced, multi-tasker; calls on others to expand network; delegates and builds trust; comfortable asking for the business and dealing with objections; able to be flexible and creative to get the deal.
- \*Other types of Business Development (e.g., transactional) would require other types of innovative aptitudes.

Understanding what type of innovation you need, helps you understand what type of innovator is needed.

### **2. Find the Innovators**

Identify the idea generators in your organization in order to open the spigot. And, don't be surprised—when it comes to new product or service breakthroughs or process improvements, many of the great creative ideas come from the quiet, unassuming team members. You have to listen; you have to pick up on cues and clues. Quiet innovators are in their heads a lot, thinking and imagining. They may not express themselves frequently or clearly. Locating them can be a real challenge.

Be aware, your greatest innovators may be your newest people. They are fresh and unfettered by the baggage or history of the organization. Get to know them, encourage their ideas; many of my clients utilize “heartbeat groups” (once a month/quarter the leader meets with employees from the frontlines without any other managers in attendance to hear what is happening and to brainstorm creative ideas).

Don't ignore your veteran folks who may be innovators who have been suppressed for many years. Unleashed they may surprise you. Your job is to find out if you can reheat their innovative juices.

There are two types of innovators--those who think *in-the-box* and those who think *out-of-the-box*. Every organization needs both. You need new, fresh ideas that are not constrained by boundaries. Those innovators provide the next new concept, revenue stream, or business model. They generate ideas and see opportunities everywhere --they shake up the status quo. They need freedom and support; structure and rules confine them and drive them away. Be prepared, their informality may be irreverent and off-putting at times.

*In-the-box* innovators work within the boundaries. They are more concerned with improving or innovating within the confines of the structure. Their goal is to do things right and avoid mistakes. They will identify amazing ways to improve processes, customer service, products, etc. These folks can occasionally appear negative. In a brainstorming situation, they may tend “to hose” the ideas. Don't let that put you off. Recognize their talents for improving the current situation and leverage those talents appropriately.

Most importantly, don't be a legend in your mind. Thinking you are the only one with good ideas in your company closes the spigot of creativity for the larger organization. Even a sole proprietor cannot depend just upon himself; engage family, friends, and advisors in brainstorming and gathering new ideas. Stop and smell the creativity--if you don't, no one will.

### **3. Assemble the Right Innovation Team**

Innovation does not just happen. Yes, it starts with an idea, but it requires a team to protect it, develop it, and execute it. Unfortunately, many crew members unknowingly "kill" or ostracize innovators. Consequently, it is important to understand the elements of innovation—it is more than one person with a great idea or a courageous entrepreneur...it takes a team!

Many innovators are great at generating ideas, but fall short on execution or follow through. Match them with others who can fill those gaps. For example, if you need an out-of-the-box approach and you utilize that type of innovator, be prepared to match him/her with others who are better at managing deadlines, planning, etc. Don't try and change the innovator or force them to transform their work style. You will only frustrate them and potentially drive them from your organization. Understand and leverage their creative strengths and move on.

### **4. Engage the Innovation Driver**

An idea, without a plan and the courage to execute it, is just a dream. Passionate leadership is needed whether it is entrepreneurial or intrepeneurial. By their nature, the entrepreneur or innovative team leader (not necessarily the specific idea generator) is authoritative, impatient, and results-oriented. They have the drive to push the innovative idea to reality.

You need to find these people. Bring them in at the right time and allow them to achieve the goal. They need to take charge and/or you need to define clearly their roles and responsibilities. They may indeed step on some toes and cause a bit of angst in the team. Work with them, develop them and coach them. Help the whole team recognize the strengths of each member, and be ready to assist as needed.

### **5. Create the Right Organizational Structure**

Be mindful of the overall organization's structure. Having out-of-the-box innovators report to "tight" managers can be a recipe for disaster. Don't drive the innovation and ultimately the innovator out of the organization if s/he reports to a highly structured, micro-manager. It doesn't mean they can't or shouldn't have a reporting relationship; however, it does mean they need to have their own self-awareness as well as the awareness of each others' work styles in order to adapt, honor each other strengths, and produce results.

In reverse, if you have an in-the-box innovator report to a "loose" manager that can lead to problems. These innovators want clear direction, specific requirements, appreciation for perfection, etc. They may view a loose manager as out of control, undependable, and risky. The innovator may flee the company or close the spigot in order to avoid the risk.

**6. Reward the Innovators and Team Appropriately**

Aligning rewards and recognition is critical. To encourage innovative behavior and creative ideas, the company must ensure that innovators are respected and rewarded. Even if the idea ultimately fails, make sure it is safe for them. Protect them.. Create the “Do-Over” Award for ideas that need to be reworked; or create the “Biggest Leap” Award for ideas that are huge. Don’t limit who can receive the awards or how many awards can be handed out...the more the better.

**7. Encourage Culture of Innovation**

It takes a village to raise an innovation! While you need innovators with new ideas and drivers to execute them, sustaining innovation and achieving results requires a culture with a mix of many strengths...some of which may appear in direct conflict to innovation.

It comes down to understanding individual work behaviors and styles. To create an innovative culture, invest in helping your leaders understand, recognize, and learn how to match the right people and behaviors to get the creative results you need. Spending \$200,000 or more on building a state-of-the-art innovation room misses the fundamentals. Rooms don’t create innovations, people do. Managers can recognize and nurture new ideas or they can kill them —unintentionally or not. If your leaders and managers can’t “brew” the creativity, let alone smell it, no amount of technology, white boards, comfy chairs, and colorful walls will produce it.

The seed (or coffee bean) of an idea is merely the first step in a long chain of events towards achieving your goals. Any step along the way can derail the innovation and disenfranchise the innovator. Help your team wake up and smell the creativity before it is too late!

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