



Four Ways We Sabotage Innovation Daily

Want inventive employees? Make sure your organization's culture promotes creativity.

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Most leaders want their organizations to be more innovative. Yet, they often undermine that innovativeness by running them as command and control entities rather than incubators for creativity and ideas.

Innovation is regularly sabotaged in four common ways, and it's up to a learning leader to avoid falling into the traps.

First, front-line ideas are not seen as important. This means the biggest source of innovation is largely ignored. People on the front lines are the ones working directly with the organization's customers, vendors, processes, products and services. This puts them in the best position to spot problems and identify opportunities for improvement. Research, as well as our experience, shows some 80 percent of an organization's improvement and innovation potential lies in bottom-up ideas.

Second, when striving for innovation, leaders tend to focus on the bigger ideas. The big ideas are the ones associated with big impacts leaders can drive forward from the top. But large numbers of small front-line ideas actually accumulate into a much greater competitive advantage, which is also more sustainable.

Big ideas are highly visible and can be quickly duplicated or countered by competitors. Small ideas, on the other hand, are much less visible to outsiders and are harder for them to copy. In addition, the small ideas associated with any innovation are often what make it truly successful. Art Fry, inventor of the Post-it note, once said the reason the 3M sticky note continues to significantly outsell its competitors, almost two decades after its patent expired, is that all of the little ideas from front-line people in the labs and in manufacturing gave the Post-it the ability to hold its adhesive qualities much better than generic alternatives.

Third, most organizations assign the responsibility for innovation to a few functions or individuals. This may result in the occasional breakthrough idea that is successfully championed through an otherwise un-innovative organization, but the overall organization remains much less innovative than it could be. At steel can manufacturer Brasilata, which implements 150 front-line ideas per person per year, every employee has the title “inventor.”

Although the company is in a mature industry, it is consistently named among the top five most innovative companies in Brazil, and is able to command premium prices because 70 percent of its sales are from products patented or developed within the last five years. Brasilata is consistently innovative because every part of it is designed to streamline the flow of ideas. Even one function that is misaligned for innovation and ideas reduces the innovativeness of the entire organization.

Fourth, an organization’s systems and policies are typically set up for control and coordination rather than ideas and innovation. Approval to implement simple ideas is required from the wrong people, at too high a level and takes too much time. The way front-line work is assigned and tracked makes it difficult for people to find enough time to work on ideas. Restrictive budgets or cumbersome purchasing procedures make it hard to get the few dollars’ worth of supplies that small ideas often need. Or, getting staff help from support functions, such as IT or maintenance, is difficult or impossible. In ways big and small, many systems and policies put in place for logical reasons from a control perspective impede innovation.

The way to stop this continual sabotaging of innovation is to learn how to set up and run an idea-driven organization — an organization in which direction is set from the top, but movement in that direction is driven by a constant stream of ideas from the front lines. When leaders gain the ability to implement 20, 30 or even or 50 ideas per person per year, their organizations will innovate at an entirely new level.

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