

Getting rid of those Pesky Innovators

Our special guest columnist today is C. Mudgeon III, CEO of Dumbleton & Dorfly. C. Mudgeon is an Alumnus of the Machiavelli School of Business at Screw U



I think that we can all agree that Innovation is a tremendous waste of time. The money that we all waste on these initiatives could be much better spent on cappuccino service for the executive boardroom or cashmere toilet paper for the restrooms on the top floor. These upstart "Innovators" challenge our assumptions, threaten the status quo and upset the delicate political stagnation that we've worked so hard to cultivate over the decades.

So how do we shut these programs down without being tagged as an "Enemy of Innovation" (like that's a bad thing?)

It's actually not that difficult. I have a few sure-fire suggestions for undermining your innovation programs, destroying that pesky enthusiasm and still making it look like you're supporting the program.

Starve them out

It's easy to just cut the funding, but that's too obvious and is easy to trace back. What you need to do is make them think that they have money, but make it impossible to get to it. Lump it in with some other organization's budget or simply subject them to the same ROI justifications or processes that everyone else has to go through. Most innovative ideas are going to have too much risk or too little guaranteed ROI to compete against "real" projects and you'll never have to fund anything. You can even openly support the Innovation projects if you can be sure that your peers will vote them down. It's a win-win situation.



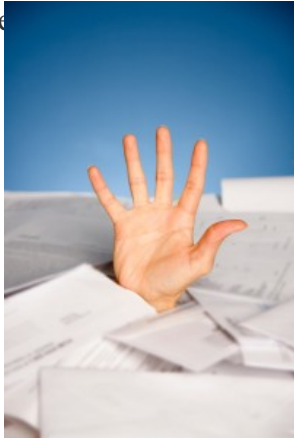
The Cage Match]

This goes along with the "Starve them Out" strategy. If you pit the Innovation program against all of your other organizations and make them compete for funding, it's pretty easy to nurture some world-class resentment. Toss the Innovation program a bone, but very publicly take the money out of another groups budget. Nothing will piss your kids off more than slapping the cookie out of their hand to give to someone else. Once the threat is firmly established, you can just "consider" some nice costly Innovation projects and watch the rest of your organization start sharpening the knives. You can pretty much guarantee that there will *never* be any available resources from your other groups to help on the Innovation projects ever again.

The Golden Child

This one is so ridiculously simple that many organizations stumble on it by accident. Just promote your Innovation program as something New, Unique, Different, "Something you idiots never thought of doing yourselves". Innovation has been happening under the covers whether you had a program or not. The secret is to alienate and piss off those skunkworks innovators and make sure that they never cooperate with the formal program. Make sure to outsource any innovation work that sneaks through approvals so that your existing associates don't get to work on them. After all, they might start to enjoy their work. A happy employee is much harder to manipulate than a disgruntled one.

Buried Alive



] The basic strategy is to deter innovation by burying the innovators in work.

In the first stage, you want to force all innovation proposals through your normal, bloated approval processes (if they aren't already bloated, you'll need to figure out how to do that on your own. It's outside the scope of this article). However, this probably won't be enough of a deterrent. You need to add an additional layer of paperwork and approvals specifically because it's an Innovation proposal. Initial Approval to Develop a Proposal for an Innovation Investigation, Secondary Approval for Innovation Investigation, Tertiary Proposal for Developing a Business Case for a Primary Innovation Investigation Proposal. The more hoops that you make them jump through, the more likely it is that you can beat the desire to innovate out of them.

In the second stage, a project has miraculously made it through approvals. When that happens, the best strategy is to funnel all of the work to the person who made the suggestion, their peers, their boss and their boss's boss. Make sure that the innovation creates as much work and discomfort for that entire reporting chain as possible. Don't provide additional resources and don't let them engage externals. That would dilute the pain. Offer them the funding, but make sure that the work is all being forced into the margins so that they can't use it. Even if you have a stubborn innovator that happily takes on the extra work, if you punish enough of the reporting chain, you'll eventually have everyone whacking the offender for you. God help them if they ever post another suggestion.

Hidden in the Basement

Innovation programs have a real possibility of succeeding with support from the business and the customer base. So you need to bury the program somewhere away from those potential supporters. One of the most common strategies is to bury it in I.T. (Information Technology). They're usually the group with the worst relationship with the business and in many cases they're already viewed as a huge black hole for money. Burying Innovation here will help to distance them from the business and ensure that they're near the front of the line when the budget cuts come. Tie them into I.T.'s (likely already strained) budget and you have the perfect way to kill or at least neuter the program



] Stealing from Yourself

Encourage other teams to run with the innovation proposals while shutting out your innovation team. That way you can execute on the good ideas without having to acknowledge where they came from. Your Innovation team can then appear to be a complete waste of time, money and resources while you still harvest the value from it. If done right, you can actually get your Innovation team to resent the groups and teams that are their partners and customers.

Supported into Submission

Provide funding for tools. Publicly declare your support for the program and encourage idea submission. Do everything possible to encourage people to keep submitting and submitting and submitting. If you can prevent any of them from actually being executed and you can keep the inbound flow going, it's just a matter of time before your program loses all credibility and the innovators give up. If you can increase the level of frustration enough, you can buy yourself a few years of the reflexive "We tried an Innovation program and it was a disaster" defense.



The Unfair Advantage]

This one requires a bit of work, but you may already have the foundation in place. Make sure that all of your project proposals ignore the long term. Don't factor in "total cost of ownership" and make sure to never actually measure the long term ROI of a project. If you have this structure in place, your projects can promise the world and effectively lose all accountability as soon as the project is delivered. Any long-term disasters will become a BAU (Business-As-Usual) expense and nobody will ever know what the projects actually cost or delivered. Since innovation tends to be more speculative and often involves short-term pain for longer term payoffs, these projects will all look like the ugly step-sisters in comparison. This is especially effective in an organization that has a focus firmly in the current and/or next quarter. This strategy alone can kill 90% of your innovation projects without ever lifting a finger.

I hope that these ideas help you to kill off those innovating leaches before they raise the bar for everyone else in your organization. If you aren't careful, those dangerous ideas might start to percolate into things like improved customer service, agility, efficiency, employee empowerment and other threatening trends. Innovation and those that encourage it need to be slapped down early and often or you may find that they can't be stopped.

C. Mudgeon was apprehended and medicated shortly after posting this article. John P. Benfield will return to the blog sometime after April 1st.