

5 ways to stifle innovation at your company



by Steven L. Blue

Innovation is difficult to come by. It is a fleeting concept that eludes most companies. In fact, the odds of a new product idea reaching full commercialization are less than 4%. And that is the best case. But, there are 5 sure-fire ways you can make certain innovation never sees the light of day at your company:

1. Don't make innovation a top priority and an "all-hands" job requirement

Many CEOs want innovation but only after "the real work" gets done. Here is a news flash: If you want to survive you better make innovation "the real work." How do you do that? By writing it into every job description. By rewarding and recognizing people who innovate. And yes, by asking people to leave if they don't.

2. Don't give people the training they need to innovate

Studies have debunked the myth that you are either born an Einstein or you're not. The truth is everyone can be creative if they are trained in the principles of creativity. So, your job is to train every single employee. I hired the previous chief creativity officer of the QVC network to teach my entire workforce how to generate new and novel ideas. He rode shotgun with us for the better part of a year and now creativity is in our DNA.

3. Don't give people the time to innovate

It is all well and good to expect innovation but not give people the time and space to do it. If you don't do this, employees will default to the tasks at hand—making the doughnuts. After all, they get paid to make the doughnuts. They are comfortable making the doughnuts. Unless you give them permission to do otherwise, that is all they will do. I tell my employees I expect 20% of their time to be spent on innovation. And I hire extra people, so we can still get production and innovation.

4. Don't give people a place to innovate

I built what I call a "Google-like campus in a factory," which is a high-tech space designed to facilitate innovation. Our employees named it the "Creation Station." My employees are welcome to gather there

whenever they want to. And they often do, collaborating across the organization in the pursuit of new products and processes.

Some people will tell you such a space is a waste of money and it has no ROI. Other critics have said building such a space only gives employees the excuse to goof off there. To that I say, you have the wrong employees. So, get the right ones.

5. Don't take risks to innovate

Without risk, there can be no innovation. You must give people your permission to fail. Otherwise, they won't even try. I tell CEOs all the time, don't take risks; take big risks. Little risks have puny returns. Little risks don't motivate people to do extraordinary things.

I am not telling you to take "bet-the-company" risks. You should never do that. Always validate risk as best you can with the information and market intelligence you can gather. And keep validating your assumptions along the way.

Bottom line, get comfortable being uncomfortable. Take the big risks and encourage your employees to do the same. What should you do if they take a risk and fail? Celebrate! Reinforce the "risk is a good thing" philosophy because that is the only way that innovation can happen.

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