

Innovation Inhibitors

Business leaders must remove stop signs that halt corporate innovation

Frequently business leaders question why there aren't more innovative efforts or innovations in their company. I hear executives say, "We value creativity and innovation around here. It's even written into our mission statement!" But they don't see it. Perhaps it is worthwhile to step back and ask if there is indeed a role we play in stopping innovations from being introduced within our companies.

We've all either made or heard the remark, "It doesn't matter if you make a mistake. We all make mistakes. What matters is that we learn from them." However, the reality is that in many instances when someone in an organization makes a mistake, he or she is often criticized or held up as an example of what not to do.

Every effort at innovation does not result in a success. And if the experience of being held up as an example of what not to do happens to an employee, what's the likelihood

factor in a price-sensitive market segment consistently positions itself as a cost-competitive producer. To maintain its competitive edge, it must regularly introduce new features and occasionally new products. The resulting message to employees is to innovate but innovate efficiently.



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Many product innovations are rarely cost competitive when first introduced, so guess what—they never see the light of day. Many managers and controllers desire to concentrate so quickly on margins that the innovation is marginalized or seldom explored. These phenomena occur in organizations today at both the macro and micro levels. Individuals, departments, cross-functional work teams and whole companies fall prey to wanting innovation but not really "walking the talk" to get it.

The signals of innovative inhibitions are similar at any level. These signals are the stop signs business leaders put in front of people.


Always be informed. If you always have

informed on all issues.

Always be a team player. If you think because someone disagrees with you they're "not being team players," then you're missing the opportunity of diversity and unique ideas being put forward. You'll only hear ideas that conform—ideas acceptable to the team. Instead, look for conflict and differences and celebrate the unique ideas that come forward—don't see them as out of bounds. Unique ideas often come from individuals.

Go through channels. If you've created channels that are so clear and specific that it doesn't enable employees to go around them or create new ones then the opportunity for new ways of solving problems without a well defined step-by-step approach, innovation will be curbed. Instead, take away the barriers that require multiple signatures and multiple sign-off steps to get something done.

Produce—get results. If the only thing you want is results, why would an employee take a risk on something that is not a sure thing in a business leader's eyes? Instead, encourage people to generate ideas, not always results. You don't have to use them all, but stimulate the organization to generate them.

These stop signs impact a company's ability to tap its people for innovative solutions to critical business issues. Business leaders put up these stop signs all the time. But if you want innovation you've got to go identify and remove stop signs so they don't halt successful innovations from being introduced and driven forward. 

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that they are going to risk introducing a new idea any time soon or for that matter any one around them that observed the criticism? For innovation to become part of the DNA of an organization, the messages given and the actions followed have to be consistent.

Here's an example. An electronics manu-

to be informed about everything going on in the company before any new idea can move forward you're missing an opportunity for innovation to occur at any time and in any place. Instead, let others be informed—pick and choose the issues that are important—you don't have to be

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