

LEADING INNOVATION

Four Dangerous Myths

BY PADDY MILLER AND THOMAS WEDELL-WEDELLSBORG

If failure rates are anything to go by, anyone leading innovation is taking on a high-risk venture.

And when things go wrong, blame is habitually laid at the feet of the middle managers who are accused of being guardians of the status quo, their minds closed to new and innovation-friendly management practices.

But this perception is wrong. In our experience, managers may not always know how to promote innovation among their people, but most of them are eagerly and actively seeking out advice on innovation wherever they can get it. And, paradoxically, this is part of the problem, because many of the clichés offered by creative bosses are, in fact, surefire recipes for disaster.

We have only to consider how managers initiate and respond to ideas presented to them by staff members.

ARE YOU THE BOSS WHO STIFLES INNOVATION?

Many people have experienced having their bold new ideas get callously squelched or diluted beyond recognition by a boss who has killed it off before it has had even a chance to develop.

Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to how this happens. We have identified three dangerous myths about managing people with ideas—popular corporate mantras about innovation that will get you in deep trouble if you actually start acting on them.

MYTH #1 CREATIVITY SHOULD BE FUN

Perhaps the most pervasive myth about creativity is that it should first and foremost be fun; and so, when managers organize innovation seminars, “having fun” becomes a main criterion in deciding what goes into the agenda. Innovation, the thinking goes, should be a nice break from our daily routines.

However, the truth is, innovation is really just another word for changing the way you do things. And while that can be fulfilling, it is rarely a lot of fun. In fact, *real* creativity typically involves one or more of the following elements—in public:

- ▶ Criticizing existing systems, structures, and processes
- ▶ Questioning your personal management practices



- ▶ Having hard conversations about previous attempts at innovation and why they didn't work

Many managers, in order to avoid potentially unpleasant conversations about how they do things, do their best to sideline the troublemakers, labeling them spoilsports when they bring up the problematic issues. Instead, they stick to brainstorming and colored Post-it notes, which might make for a fun experience but rarely lead to anything but corporate play-acting.

Pursuing creativity *can* be fulfilling if done right, but you need to be open to the fact that good parts of the process will not be a whole lot of fun. Having fun is good, but it must never stand in the way of having the hard discussions as well.

MYTH #2 ALL IDEAS ARE GOOD; ALL GOOD IDEAS ARE SELF-EVIDENT

It's tempting to tell your people there's no such thing as a bad idea. That is just not true. There are

lots of bad ideas out there, and many of them will sooner or later end up on your desk. Really good ideas are rare, and as a manager you are faced with the uncomfortable fact that most of the ideas your people come up with will be either bad, unworkable, or just plain crazy.

Telling employees during an innovation spiel that "All ideas are good ideas" dilutes trust. Most of your staff members know that not all ideas will be taken seriously, and if you say otherwise, your more experienced employees will think you are being either naïve or hypocritical. It also gives you a practical problem—when somebody approaches you with a truly bad idea, you can't give your honest opinion without appearing inconsistent. People will stop coming to you with any ideas, bad or good.

Instead of playing pretend games, it is essential to be open about the fact that not all ideas are worth pursuing. Employees know this already and will respect you the more for saying it.

Of course, knowing which ideas to pursue is its own trick. If you are like most managers, you probably consider yourself to be a reasonably good judge of new ideas. But truly original ideas by definition go against common sense at first glance; if they didn't, somebody else would already have pursued them. And research has shown that as we climb the career ladder, we become less receptive to the perspectives of others, and more convinced of the merits of our own private reasoning.

This has the disturbing consequence that if you are a manager, chances are you won't know a good idea when you see it. In fact, it will probably look a lot like a bad idea. If you want to open your mind and your company to game-changing new ideas, you need to put aside your action orientation—otherwise a valuable trait—and stop judging ideas the second they are presented to you. Instead, write them down and let them stay there for a day or two before you evaluate them.

MYTH #3 INNOVATION IS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In most organizations, personal advancement is based on the acquisition of competencies such as leadership, communication, and implementation skills. Typically, you will find innovation described as a subset of entrepreneurial skills. Put simply, companies are locked into equating innovative skills with a demonstration of entrepreneurial capability and, hence, managers often assign the pursuit of innovation to their most enterprising employees. That may seem to make sense if you don't examine it too closely.

Many highly successful innovators, however, have no entrepreneurial or commercial sense at all. Think of the original Apple team—Jobs and Wozniak—one was the business-minded entrepreneur, the other was the techie, the inventor, the innovator. Innovative people are occupied with solving a problem, not with making a buck, and they are often quite oblivious to the commercial perspectives when they start their tinkering. If you want ideas, don't go to the entrepreneurs; go to the nerds, the passionate tinkerers in the corner.

MYTH #4 THE CREATIVE IMPERATIVE

The final, overarching myth about innovation is that you need to pursue it in the first place.

The pursuit of innovation has a clear cost; to work, it must be reflected not just in your words and PowerPoint slides, but also in your deeds and your organizational systems. Innovation takes significant resources—time, money, attention—that could all be used for other and perhaps better purposes, because the truth is that innovation never happens in a vacuum. So the value of pursuing innovation must be weighed carefully against all the *other* priorities of the company.

In doing this, it is crucial to remember that despite all the hype, your best innovation strategy might be not to innovate at all. *MW*

Paddy Miller is professor of Managing People in Organisations at IESE Business School in Barcelona. Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg is a London-based consultant specializing in corporate creativity and innovation. The article is based on a forthcoming book by the two authors. For more information, visit www.miller-wedell.com

Azra Brankovic, research associate at IESE, contributed to this article.

To encourage creativity and innovation in your organization, attend AMA's seminars "Creativity and Innovation: Unleash Your Potential for Greater Success" (www.amanet.org/2208), and "AMA's Advanced Executive Leadership Program" (www.amanet.org/2104).