

# Watch out for idea sentinels!

Saint Paul wrote in one of his epistles: "What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do".

Those who really want to capitalize on the innovation honeymoon, the unusually insightful and creative initial period of new employees, have to share ideas with outsiders as soon as possible. Alas, many people fail to do so. This is due to the presence of what I call "idea sentinels". These are forces that keep insights captive in the organization, preventing the flow of novel thoughts to the innovation abode.

A man of premier rank first has to identify the five most powerful interrelated idea blockers, which form a cordon around the organization, before he can formulate and implement effective counter-strategies (see illustration).

## 1. Leadership

Despite praising the value of innovation, many headmen act as idea guards. Their intellectual tightness, which is likely to be emulated by followers or, at least, reduce their degree of freedom, can be due to various reasons. Some helmsmen are simply unaware of how much emptying their idea barn matters in the process of innovation. Further, there are leaders who place excessive confidence in themselves or the organization. As a result, they may simply be unable to imagine that outsiders could add any value that could not be created internally.

Some organizational chieftains are too self-absorbed and proud to ask for outside feedback. There are also many executives who crave ownership and recognition. Covetous leaders are more interested in taking than giving. They also find it

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difficult to let loose. They are anxious to originate all ideas themselves, for only then they can delight in the sense of intellectual ownership. He who longs for applause trusts in the following logic: If he were to allow strangers to improve one of his ideas, he later would not be entitled to claim full credit for it and thus could not bask in the resulting fame.

Certain standard-bearers simply are very risk-averse and thus prefer not to tell a stranger about their insights. In reality, this approach is extremely hazardous though, since costly errors may not be corrected. Besides, some guiding lights fear that confidential and sensitive information could be leaked, expecting that this would harm some constituents. Undoubtedly, this danger is clear and present in certain organizations, such as the military and intelligence services, and certain organizational functions. But even there, isolation in all matters usually is not wise, since it is beneficial for certain new concepts to be shared with the outside world at an early stage, for example, to test their

effectiveness.

## 2. Collective mental maps

Shared mental maps can act as a powerful impediment to passing on ideas to outsiders. Oftentimes, traditional beliefs and approaches used by the previous generation are simply accepted by the next one without questioning, even though they might be inappropriate in the information age.

In many cases, you will be able to diagnose whether an organization is open as soon as you arrive at its gate. You might either receive a warm greeting from the security guard or be treated like a terror suspect. Oftentimes, protective, sect-like organizations are not only wary of letting outsiders in, but also about letting ideas out and collaborating with aliens. Selection and socialization usually ensure that their mem-

bers share a common mental map, on which the organization is an island surrounded by a hostile environment.

It is also useful to analyze the language that leaders and followers are commonly using. The members of closed organizations often speak of "war" to describe competitive rivalry and refer to competitors by using the word "enemy". Because language influences thoughts and resulting action, they are reluctant to bounce off ideas in the market.

In some cultures, people clearly distinguish between family members, who are trusted, and the outside world, which is treated with deep suspicion. When this national culture pervades the organization, members tend to circle the wagons.

## 3. Strategic posture

The strategic orientation of an

organization can act as another idea lock. Leaders may pursue what I call a "gold standard strategy". They may aim at producing highly differentiated products that are to become the industry reference in terms of innovation and sophistication. These movers and shakers are always hunting for the next "big thing", eager to come up with a killer application. Their strategy of choice often is to launch proprietary products, which endow their companies with monopolistic pricing power. Organizational members adopting such an approach usually are obsessed with being first in the market and thus reluctant to transmit ideas to outsiders.

## 4. Formal controls

Formal structures, processes and systems can also prevent idea exchange with outsiders. There is a trend for many large organizations to centralize power in globally integrated units. This concentration can reinforce isolationist tendencies at the top. Even inside the companies, feedback is often neither welcomed nor taken seriously; outside opinions carry even less weight. This structural arrangement makes it also more difficult to quickly act on the local knowledge of front-line staff.

Besides, many companies have established specialized functions, such as compliance departments, which draw up tight rules, standardize procedures, and design complex systems to ensure that the behavior of all organizational citizens is lawful. In contrast, many firms fail to create specialized roles that span the boundary with the external environment. Compliance officers often act as gatekeepers. Eager to conform

with regulations, they might actually overshoot and impose a virtual information embargo on the whole organization. To prevent anti-trust suits, they tend to strongly discourage interaction with competitors.

## 5. Capabilities and resources

Many organizations also lack the means for effectively sharing nascent ideas with outsiders. Its members may not be competent in reaching out to strangers and effectively communicating with them. Employees might not have learned how to exchange ideas while safeguarding the interests of their employer. Besides, many companies fail to create a seamless technological interface with suppliers and other stakeholders. Further, firms may not fund any outreach activity.

Interlocking idea sentries create an iron curtain, fencing off the organization from its innovation abode. The problem is rooted in the hearts and minds of leaders and their followers. Undoubtedly, it is an uphill struggle to change their disposition. Albert Einstein remarked: "It is harder to change a pre-conceived opinion than it is to split the atom".

[Part 11 of the "Innovation Honeymoon" series. To be continued]

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