

# The 10 best ways to kill innovation: A how-not-to manager guide

**Editor's note:** Strategies columns feature businesspeople in the Twin Cities sharing advice for growing companies.

To inquire about submitting a column, contact Managing Editor Steve LeBeau at (612) 288-2108 or slebeau@bizjournals.com.

Are you tired of hearing about innovation and how much of it you're supposed to be doing? Are people in your organization getting a little too "creative" instead of just getting the work done the way you want? Are you annoyed by fresh ideas coming from unexpected places?

It seems like everyone is talking about innovation, about how other countries are going to eat our lunch (or already are) if we don't innovate more. We're told that America's economy was built on innovation but that we're losing our edge. I'm not so sure.

Yes, we've had great innovators, from Thomas Edison to Sam Walton to Steven Jobs, but what has long been a hallmark of American industry is our ability to suppress those tendencies. We've spent generations refining management techniques to smother any budding creativity at the earliest opportunity. And now we're supposed to let up? Just when it seems to be working so well? When our people seem to finally be getting the message? Talk to a typical employee inside almost any major American corporation and they will tell

you that despite a lot of talk about so-called enlightened leadership, the reigning cultural norms are still to conform, follow the program and don't question authority. We've worked so hard to get here. We've all but perfected the art of killing innovation and creativity. We're doing it successfully in company after mature company and now we're supposed to stop?

It's time we reminded ourselves how we got where we are, not lose sight of these time-honored practices:

**1. Provide all information on a strictly need-to-know basis.**

This is necessary to maintain the prerogatives of management and to make sure no one's running around with excess information. They might use it to make unforeseen connections and come up with new ideas.

**2. Determine the "best" way to do a task and insist that employees strictly adhere to that procedure.**

To maximize efficiency, assure consistent quality and preclude any changes that might be required of management. If you allow employees to alter anything, they might come up with a better way to do it.

**3. Co-opt the ideas of those you supervise, whenever possible, so credit is transferred up the chain of command.**

That way all ideas will get the most 'serious' hearing possible, and no one will suffer the embarrassment of having a subordinate out-think them. Doing this just once will usually prevent an innovative thinker from ever offering new ideas again.

**4. Evaluate ideas based on their source rather than their merits.**

Some people couldn't possibly have anything to contribute. And even if they do, you really don't want them to.

**5. Always correct people in front of their colleagues.**

That way everyone will learn from the mistake and no one will ever dare to make an independent decision again.

**6. Always hire the person who is most experienced at what you want them to do.**

So that it will continue to get done the same way.

**7.1 Always reward teams, never individuals.**

**7.2 Always reward individuals, never teams.** Either approach will discourage innovation a substantial percentage of the time. So just pick one according to the latest business fad. You don't want to be troubled by having to sort out the subtleties of each situation.

**8. Treat all explanations as excuses.**

Tell them to, "Just do it," to assure that no one questions your authority, and so you can avoid taking any responsibility for the problem. This will assure that you don't learn anything from past mistakes.

**9. Severely penalize failures.**

To assure that they're never repeated, and so you can say you took corrective steps when they are.

**10. Minimize trust.**

Trust leads to healthy communication, which helps people make connections, which leads to new ideas.

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Any one of these may be powerful enough to stop innovation cold, but they're more effective and reliable when used in combination. If you're a business leader, you have almost certainly used one or more of these at one time or another. (I know I have.) If you want to avoid innovation, you need to keep at it.

Don't let down your guard now or you'll risk unleashing waves of creative new ideas.

**Dennis Stauffer** is founder and president of Insight Fusion, a speaking and consulting firm. He accepts suggestions for adding to the above list at [dstauffer@insightfusion.com](mailto:dstauffer@insightfusion.com).