

Football, Creativity, and Innovation

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal¹ on how some companies foster creativity (or fail to) made me think about a 1975 commentary in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* titled, “Dog days and siriasis – How to kill a football player.”² In the article, Dr. James P. Knochel, a sports medicine physician from Dallas, identified “seven ways to kill a football player” in an attempt to galvanize the attention of coaches, athletic trainers, and team physicians to the threat of death from heat illness, a tragic occurrence that unfortunately continues to this day.

What’s the link between a 1975 article on heat illness in football players and a 2013 article on workplace creativity? Just as coaches can make well-intentioned decisions that endanger their athletes, companies can do likewise with attempts to foster creativity in the workplace, particularly with innovation efforts for products that rely upon scientific support to substantiate their effectiveness.

Truth be told, I have little-to-no expertise in creativity or innovation programs except that in my 23-year stint in the corporate world, I participated in numerous innovation frenzies, a collective experience that prompted observations and opinions about the innovation process – about approaches that worked and those that did not. I’ve witnessed how corporate time, money, energy, and goodwill can be exhausted by extended wild goose chases sparked by people whose sincere intent and loquacious enthusiasm wasn’t matched by the technical expertise required to distinguish a good idea from a bad one. I’ve endured countless innovation seminars and brainstorm sessions, worked with innovation consultants, listened to innovation speakers, read innovation articles, and perused innovation books – all of which seemed a poor substitute to unleashing talented, motivated, well-trained employees toward a clear, targeted goal in an environment that gives more than lip service to real creativity and the sustained effort required to make something of it.

I was drawn to Justin Brady’s article on how to sponsor creativity in the workplace because of its clear and simple advice about the value of listening to, empathizing with, and trusting the instincts, experience, and expertise of employees. In stark contrast are the “7 ways to kill innovation and creativity,” a list inspired by Dr. Knochel’s 1975 commentary in JAMA.

¹ Brady J. Some companies foster creativity, others fake it. *Wall Street Journal*, accessed May 21, 2013.

² Knochel <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324744104578475220275737136.html> JP. Dog days and siriasis – How to kill a football player. *JAMA* 233:513-515, 1975. For those interested in the seven ways to kill a football player: 1) hold the second practice of the day in the heat of the afternoon; 2) don’t provide anything to drink; 3) encourage players to ingest salt tablets; 4) give overweight players diuretics or have them sit in a sauna; 5) have players wear full uniforms and helmets for every practice; 6) continue wind sprints until many players collapse; and 7) give players amphetamines.

3 Ways to Stimulate Creativity & Innovation

Listen, Empathize, and Trust -
Justin Brady's L.E.T. Principle

A company's creative output is sparked by leaders who consistently exhibit three simple behaviors:

Listen - When employees feel that their input is truly valued, they are more likely to be engaged, creative, and helpful.

Empathize - Not only relate to someone else's feelings, but work to understand the roots of those feelings.

Trust - Sometimes only the innovator has a sense of an idea's potential and just isn't able to articulate it clearly. Creative ideas should be challenged, but there are times when open trust in the person's core intent is needed.

Mr. Brady makes the point that creativity is a messy process and failure is often a part of that process. "If you don't want that type of culture, you don't want creativity."



7 Ways to Kill Creativity & Innovation

1. Innovate from the top down.
2. Make innovation a periodic effort.
3. Treat all ideas as equal.
4. Focus on home runs.
5. Rely only on cross-functional teams.
6. Eschew outside expertise.
7. Rely heavily on consultants.



Seven Ways to Kill Innovation - A Little Detail

1. Innovate from the top down. There's no doubt that successful innovation efforts must have the enthusiastic endorsement and ongoing interest of senior management. But when senior management deigns to design and manage the innovation process, good outcomes rarely result. Simply put, senior management rarely has the time or the skills required to make innovation successful. Once an innovation program has been designed and implemented, those in the trenches should be responsible – and accountable – for making things happen. Senior management should help remove impediments, ensure adequate resources, simplify processes, and generally keep the innovation ship pointed in the right direction, leaving the real work to those who better understand the technical nuances and limitations of the challenges at hand.

2. Make innovation a periodic effort. It is not uncommon for businesses to turn on innovation efforts whenever the competitive environment requires it, only to put innovation on the back burner once the business challenges subside. In one regard, that's an understandable dynamic – why waste resources on activity that isn't as important as it once was? On the other hand, an innovation effort that ebbs and flows over the years is not likely to be one that consistently takes advantage of organizational strengths or quickly responds to changing forces in the marketplace.

Innovation should be organic to the organization rather than the province of a special group or the subject of periodic emphasis. Innovation efforts shouldn't be compartmentalized into special groups, because doing so tacitly implies that it's no longer part of everyone's responsibility. That said, it should be recognized that some people have a natural instinct for innovation, while for others, innovation can be a learned response. For some, innovative thinking is an unattainable skill. Innovation efforts have to take these considerations into account to take advantage of innovative thinkers and keep from frustrating those whose time and talents are best placed elsewhere.

3. Treat all ideas as equal. “No killer comments” can be the right approach early in the innovation process when it's important to get as many ideas out in the open as possible. But once that time passes, the emphasis should quickly change to one of *ruthless evaluation*. Successful innovators separate good ideas from bad ones early in the innovation process because they have the organizational fortitude and expertise – or access to appropriate expertise – to do so. With the right expertise it is usually not difficult to determine if there is adequate evidence – or the potential to develop such evidence – in support of a product concept. Yet many food and beverage organizations delude themselves into investing resources behind product or ingredient ideas simply because the promise of a benefit is too tempting to pass up or because the science behind the idea wasn't adequately vetted. There is an opportunity-cost associated with pursuing weak ideas and it's rarely low.



Ideas that survive the first round of evaluation should be scrutinized on an ongoing basis to ensure that they snugly fit the product concept and that there is at least some confidence that evidence of benefit can be developed from existing science or from additional research. Weak science isn't sustainable and sustainable science takes considerable time, effort, and commitment to develop into something of real value. The reality is that when it comes to game-changing innovation, most of the low-hanging fruit is rotten. Ideas that seem promising at first blush often lose their luster with further examination. Organizational frustration with the innovation process is unavoidable when the excitement over the initial promise of ideas is repeatedly followed by disappointment when the promise turns out to be hollow. Adhering to clear criteria that describe success standards throughout the innovation process helps make important go-no-go decisions easier. An added benefit is that organizational expectations are kept in line with emerging findings. Products that actually make it to market can also over-promise and under-deliver in the same fashion, frustrating consumers when the product benefit doesn't live up to consumer expectations. Classic examples are weight-loss aids and fat-burner supplements. Easy weight loss is a lovable concept but is dripping with spotty science and limited product efficacy, amply illustrated by the thousands of weight-loss products that have already come and gone from the marketplace.

4. Focus on home runs. The natural tendency is for organizations to focus on big, game-changing ideas that energize an entirely new consumer base and create a robust new revenue stream. But for every home run, there are thousands of strikeouts that occur by always trying to swing for the fences. The reality is that singles win games more often than home runs; successful smaller ideas can add up to or even surpass a big one. Capture all viable ideas, regardless of size, and nurture each to its logical conclusion.

5. Rely solely on cross-functional teams. There's nothing inherently wrong – and a lot that can be right – with creating teams of people who represent key areas of a business. For example, blending marketing, sales, supply chain, and R&D expertise into a team charged with generating innovative new-product ideas can broaden the scope of the ideas that are generated and help provide some up-front context about feasibility. Those are good things, and at the proper time in the innovation process (e.g., at the beginning and end), cross-functional teams are indispensable for getting innovative products into the marketplace. But there is also an essential place in the innovation process for homogeneous teams of innovators, people who share a singular or closely allied expertise that enables them to drill into the detailed nuances of a new idea and quickly determine its essence and feasibility. Homogeneous innovation teams are well suited for the middle phase of the broader innovation process, to assess ideas spawned by cross-functional teams and provide feedback that the cross-functional teams can use to further refine (or reject) ideas. A cautionary note: homogenous teams must be challenged to identify ways to improve upon the ideas they are asked to assess, even the bad ideas. In other words, instead of concluding that an idea simply won't work, the teams should identify the changes

required to make the idea feasible. That type of feedback allows the cross-functional teams to consider every possible path to success, even the outlandish ones.

6. Eschew external expertise. Successful businesses employ bright, motivated, experienced people and wisely engage them in internal innovation efforts. That's as it should be because no one knows the nuances of a business or is more committed to business success than a faithful employee. As successful businesses recognize, evaluating new and innovative product concepts or benefits requires having the right people ask the right questions at the right times. For projects that are rooted in science, an assessment of the strength of scientific evidence by independent experts is often a helpful adjunct to internal evaluation, if for no other reason than providing an objective, third-party assessment of the strength of the supporting evidence.

When it comes to finding truly functional products or ingredients, rarely are there open-and-shut cases. At the beginning of the innovation effort, there's often just enough information to inform, to excite, and most important to keep in mind – to mislead. One reason there is often unnecessary wheel-spinning associated with innovation is the failure to conduct the necessary scientific due diligence early in the innovation process. This is an unfortunate oversight because at the end of the day, it's better to craft a marketing strategy around good science than to attempt to form-fit bits and pieces of science to fit a marketing strategy. In addition, solid science is an absolute requirement to sustain a long-term relationship with customers and consumers.

7. Rely heavily on consultants. There is no doubt that consultants can play important roles in helping businesses design, implement, and sustain innovation that truly delivers ongoing benefits. But consultants should be hired precisely because they bring a different perspective, not because they have the answers to a company's innovation needs. The answers to innovation challenges have to be found internally; they can't be farmed out to consultants whose tenure with the business will usually be short-lived. Consultants and employees work most productively together when consultants complement employee efforts rather than try to usurp or redirect them. That's often a fine line to tread, but good consultants can quickly assess internal needs and adapt their efforts accordingly.