

ARE THESE INNOVATION ASSASSINS LURKING IN YOUR ORGANIZATION?



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Innovation—It's the lifeblood of any organization. It is absolutely necessary in order to be a leader in your field and to keep your products and services from becoming irrelevant, too expensive, or otherwise losing value to your customers. As crucial as innovation is to organizations, innovation assassins can be found hiding in plain sight throughout any organization. Who are these culprits, how can we recognize them, and why would they undermine efforts that are crucial to the success, and even survival, of their own organization?

For a clue as to what an innovation assassin might look like, start by looking in a mirror. That's right, it could be any of us, because the most common innovation killers result from mindsets and behaviors that are completely normal. In fact, they are hardwired in our brains, because they are necessary for our survival. These are the self-protective "fight or flight" stress responses that evolved over millions of years to protect us from threats. They are initiated in the "threat center" of our brain's limbic system, a relatively simple neural pathway that can be activated in nanoseconds, allowing us to react instantly to a perceived threat. The key is "perceived". Experiences that we have had over our lifetime—a scolding parent, a teasing or bullying classmate, social rejection, economic hardship, and many, many more—have taught our brain what might constitute a threat. This self-protection system works so well, because the brain reacts to situations that seem similar to the original experience, without us

having to even think about it (shoot first, ask questions later). So, as adults we react to situations at work or at home based on events that may have happened years ago, all in an unconscious effort at self-preservation.

So, what does this have to do with quashing innovation? When our stress response is triggered, we hunker down into self-preservation mode. Tackle complex situations? Not now. Think creatively? Uh-uh. Make decisions in the face of uncertainty or ambiguity? My head hurts thinking about it. Try something that might fail? No way! When our stress response kicks in, we can only take in limited information. We think in terms of “black or white” and are unable to navigate uncertainty or consider complex situations. Typical behaviors of people in a self-preservation mindset are avoidance, blame, confrontation, coercion, managing, cooperation, and meeting objectives. It can feel like we are getting a lot done, but **in a stress response we actually accomplish less with considerable effort** and within a very narrow bandwidth. However, the perception of productivity keeps us anchored in our stress response, causes us to use its associated behaviors as our default, and ultimately can lead to dissatisfaction and burnout. It also turns out that most of us default to a self-protective mindset most of the time,¹ usually without even realizing it.

Ultimately, it all boils down to *fear of loss*. There are entire functions within organizations that are constructed to prevent loss: legal, finance, regulatory, HR, among others. This makes complete sense, but it can be applied so rigorously that efforts to innovate are constantly suffocated. Fear of loss is so pervasive, because it is primal. Loss of job may come immediately to mind, and within that thought is embedded loss of security, reputation, and sense of self-worth. Fear of loss in the workplace is completely rational, because companies have been reinforcing that message to their employees for the past 2–3 decades with massive layoffs, cessation of pension plans, “off-shoring” jobs, or “on-shoring” less expensive talent. These fears keep us hunkered down in our self-protective silo, where we can maintain the illusion of safety, keeping us from trying things that might not work, and even crushing new ideas!

Because of this, people will behave in ways that are in their self-interest, even when they are unaware of this motivation! We all do this, and yet this basic aspect of human nature is typically overlooked. We see it all the time, but we just call it by different names: politics, processes and regulations, budgetary priorities, resource constraints, micro-managing, missing deadlines, ignoring emails. What we notice is the behaviors and outcomes, which often slow down or stop innovation altogether. Of course, that is usually not the intention, but because each person is acting

according to his or her own self-protective perspective, it may be the single greatest threat to innovation in an organization.

What does this look like in organizations?

Avoidance—Not responding to emails or returning phone calls, delaying communicating about some critical problem or failure, missing deadlines. Avoidance is a highly prevalent behavior in organizations, and it creates tremendous frustration. It stems from not wanting to be blamed, or be “yelled at”, as I have heard people explain. Avoidance behaviors are a critical red flag of an organization’s culture.

Blaming—Any time you are trying to innovate, something will happen that can be considered a “failure” or “problem”. It’s neither, really, because when dealing with uncertainty unforeseen things always happen. These are learning opportunities, of course, but in many organizations they are considered to be failures that are someone’s fault. It’s a false sense of accountability, and people learn quickly to not try things that might fail.

Coercing—Here are three words that innovation assassins often use. “You need to...”. There are often valid reasons for people to use these words, but they always carry a direct or an implied threat, and that triggers our stress response.

Managing—As the adage says, “Manage processes, not people”. Managing often takes the form of controlling or coercing others, which is a guaranteed trigger for our self-protective stress response. Sure, we’ll work hard to meet objectives, produce deliverables, etc., but we’re really just tolerating the situation and doing what we believe we are supposed to do.

Cooperating—Cooperation is *not* collaboration. Cooperation is a “have to”, whereas collaboration is a “want to”. Yes, we’ll cooperate with others to get tasks done, but we are still in a self-protective, “me first” mindset.

Silos—No doubt you can identify silos within your organization. And there’s a good chance that your executives or HR have expounded on breaking down silos and fostering collaboration. The problem is, people often do not understand the completely rational basis for silos, and as a result the proposed solutions usually fail. When I asked one executive why she thought silos were so prevalent in the organization, she shrugged and replied, “It’s just people.” Sure, but what specifically about people? Silos are a completely normal outcome of our primal needs to belong and for self-preservation. The group provides a sense of protection and security. Silos come in all sizes and can exist within a function or span across multiple functions. Silos kill innovation through opacity: hiding information, feigning resource

constraints, restricting access to activities, and not showing up to meetings.

Given that these behaviors are so normal, and that we are often oblivious to these behaviors in ourselves, it is a wonder that innovation happens at all! Fortunately, we are not limited to our self-protective mindset. People prefer to explore new possibilities, to improve upon the current situation, and to express their creative talents. When we collaborate, coach and empower others, see situations as opportunities rather than problems, and then give birth to something that creates value in people's lives it feels great! Yes, we can all be unwitting innovation assassins, but we can also be innovation superheroes. We just have to set our minds to it.

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I'd love to read about your experiences and thoughts about innovation assassins, so please add a comment. Thanks!

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