



How To Kill The Atmosphere For Innovation

There is the false perception that developing a new technology product is all inspiration; that you spend a few minutes going EUREKA! and everything is easy. The truth is, developing new products or upgrading existing products are processes that rely much more on perspiration than inspiration.

Concepts for new products generally come from ideas identified first. These concepts are then used as the launch point for development. And there are many ways that the launch can be prevented in the first place or can end in spectacular failure. To start, the atmosphere must be conducive to generating innovative ideas. And when it comes to killing this atmosphere, there are some ways to do it:

Not invented here. A lot of companies and individuals seem to have the idea that their own ideas are better than anyone else's. Big mistake. If you continually rely on the same sources, you'll continually get the same results. And while that may yield good results for a while, it prevents and inhibits real invention. To generate inventive solutions to problems means looking and listening to sources that sometimes are entirely unexpected. It means looking at the process of developing concepts as a harvest that uses the best ideas, regardless of where they originated.

Taking the credit for someone else's ideas. A standard mode of operation, unfortunately, for some people. If you're one of those, do you really think that nobody noticed? Taking credit for someone else's idea is not only wrong, it also keeps people from passing on the ideas that could end up significantly improving your products. Wherever your ideas come from, give credit. Loudly. Even if you don't use that particular idea, it fosters the generation of other ideas. From all angles.

Punishing mistakes. I'm talking the wrong product built, test failures, unhappy customers. A tough problem, especially after things have gone horribly wrong. The typical reaction: find the guilty party and punish them. And why is that wrong? Because people will quickly notice that if they take a chance, if they try something different and it doesn't succeed, there'll be hell to pay. The result: no one takes chances, new ideas evaporate, and true invention goes by the wayside. Instead of punishing the guilty, focus on changing the process to prevent such errors in the future. Make sure that the process in place catches errors before they can reach a magnitude that has a significant impact. And make sure everyone understands that to be extraordinary, you have to stick your head out and make mistakes. And you won't lose your head when that happens.

Undefined customer benefits. Generally, the person or group that identified the original concept is already sold on its benefits. However, these benefits must translate into two things:

- Profits for the company producing the product and
- Concrete benefits to the customer.

On occasion, the benefits seen by the originators of ideas do not square with the benefits paying customers are looking for. To prevent this, focus on re-framing product ideas in terms of solutions to a problem (instead of ideas for a product). If the idea then still has merit, the next step is to define multiple approaches to provide that solution.

Avoid these pitfalls, and you generate an environment that fosters the creation of new ideas and the generation of inventive products. Step into these traps, and your products won't end in failure. They'll never make it to the launch ramp.