

In an innovation rut? Here are tip-offs

Use of certain phrases could indicate that creativity is dead at your organization

JIM CARROLL PERSONAL OPINION

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result each time."

—Albert Einstein

Are you stuck in an innovation rut?

Maybe so: I find that a lot of organizations have become so focused on getting things done that they've lost their ability to have any sort of creativity.

That's why Einstein's comment is so appropriate; in a world of rapid and constant change, many people still manage to think that they can get away with routine.

That's why I'd suggest you undertake an "attitude inventory" during your next staff, board or executive meeting.

It's easy enough to do: Simply take this checklist into your meeting and listen for the innovation-killer phrases. Every time you hear one, score one point (except for special scoring where noted).

While there is no magic scientific formula, I'd suggest that if you score over 10 points in one meeting, you've got a big problem. Score over 20, and you are innovation-dead. Over 30 points, and you might as well shut the whole game down — you don't deserve to be in operation.

■ Early bird bonus phrase (3 points): "We've always done it this way." Chances are that you will immediately hear these words early on in any meeting.

This is the worst possible phrase that can be used by any organization; so bad, in fact, that you score extra points for this one. It means

that you've got some pretty thick organizational sclerosis that is clogging up your ability to try to do anything new. If your team members are in this frame of mind, it's time for dramatic action.

■ "It won't work." In this case, pessimism has become the cornerstone for success. Any new idea or initiative is immediately shot down and relegated to the failure heap even before it's had a chance to be looked at. That's not a good way to take yourself into the future, and hence, such cynicism should be outlawed.

■ "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard." Anyone who dares to be different, and who suggests anything new and innovative will have the wind taken right out of their sails as soon as they hear this phrase. Best to address this issue by ensuring that people understand the cardinal rule of innovation: It's better to have 99 dumb ideas and one great idea, than to not have any ideas at all.

■ "That's not my problem." There's a bit of a teamwork issue here, don't you think? In a world of massive complexity and ever-increasing challenges, an organization needs to have a culture in which everyone is able and willing to pitch in, regardless of what might be involved and what it might take.

■ "You can't do that." Most often used when someone comes up against ingrained organizational behaviour, or smacks their head into the rules and regulations defining day-to-day operations. Most often encountered these days when governance issues rise to the forefront. Structure is important, but it shouldn't stand in the way of innovation.

■ "I don't know how." At a time when careers are changing overnight, this might indicate that you



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Use a checklist at your next meeting to listen for danger signs that innovation is dead.

are doing rather poorly in the areas of education and professional development. In today's age, no one should be in the position of lacking necessary skills.

The only way to ensure that your organization can meet the challenges ahead is for everyone to be in a mindset that is prepared to take on anything, and for everyone to be willing to do all that's necessary to learn what's needed to get things done.

■ "I don't think I can." Self-confidence can be lacking in many people today, given that they are finding so many new demands on their skills. If you encounter this phrase, it is probably best to nurture a culture that supports risk; people should know that they can take on something new, and not suffer

from adverse consequences if it doesn't quite work out.

■ "I didn't know that." Lack of proper communication is behind the failure of many new initiatives. When someone uses this phrase, it indicates that you've got a pretty serious problem on this front. Make sure that you've got a culture that is collaborative and open; in which information sharing is encouraged and information-hoarding is punished.

■ Five bonus points: "The boss won't go for it." Innovation starts at the top, and the leadership must set the proper tone in order to make it possible. If this phrase is used, you've really got some serious trouble.

■ Ten bonus points: "Why should I care?" Several recent surveys have

shown that 50 to 75 per cent of the staff in a typical organization will jump ship if given the chance. Another survey showed that at least 40 per cent of people are already thinking about a better job — on their first day in a new job. If you encounter this phrase, it means that people aren't engaged; they don't share your sense of passion and purpose.

You have to do more to build a collective spirit and an overall culture that supports everyone moving forward in the same direction.

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