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HOW TO KILL BAD IDEAS, BUT CULTIVATE AN IDEAS CULTURE

by **Melissa Jezior**

Maybe you've had that boss. Or heard stories about that boss. Or maybe you are that boss.

“That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” said that boss.

In front of everyone. With no empathy, no constructive feedback and no respect.

You're deflated and embarrassed. But the effects of that dismissive sentence can go much further. Some on your team may feel empowered to use a similar poisonous communication style, while others could be reluctant to offer ideas for fear they'll also be humiliated.

And then there's the boss that just avoids confrontation altogether, giving no feedback whatsoever. Ideas just seem to stall or evaporate. What's the point in expending brain power and time when ideas are met with radio silence?

Sure, not every idea will pass muster, and there truly are bad ideas. Or, someone may have a good idea, but it's a bad fit for the organization's goals or just too costly.

Apple founder Steve Jobs said successful companies are tough enough to kill many ideas, even good ones. In 1997, Jobs described how he had teams across the company working on wildly different ideas. But the multitude of ideas distracted Apple from focusing on its core business.

That's when Apple had to focus.

“People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I'm actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done. Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things.”

Steve Jobs

So how does a leader kill some ideas while still fostering a culture that values ideas? Ideas are the lifeblood of an organization, and killing ideas the wrong way can be toxic to your organization's competitiveness and ability to retain employees.

Our research indicates that over a third (37 percent) of U.S. workers say they are likely to leave their company in the next year. That number jumps to almost half (44 percent) when workers say they don't think their employer effectively channels the creativity of its workforce. But when employees feel that their creativity is effectively channeled, 66 percent say they are unlikely to leave. Only about half of employees in our study felt their employer frequently seeks their ideas to improve tools and processes.

This means that if companies want employees to develop and share their ideas, there must be a process to productively listen to all employees' ideas, keep the ideas that are a good fit for the organization, and toss the ones that aren't—all while cultivating an environment that empowers employees to keep the ideas coming.

44%
LIKELY TO LEAVE
their company because
they don't think their
employer effectively
channels the creativity
of its workforce.

66%
UNLIKELY TO LEAVE
their company because
they feel their creativity
is effectively channeled.

Source: Eagle Hill Corporate Ideas Survey 2017.

Here are five practical steps leaders can implement to foster an ideas culture while also delicately killing ideas that just won't work for your organization.



1. Invite ideas.

The first is to create a process to proactively solicit ideas that is embedded in the day-to-day so it becomes part of the fabric of the organization. For example, AT&T launched the "Innovation Pipeline," a crowd-sourced tool that lets employees submit, vote on and discuss ideas. Employees have "virtual currency" to spend on ideas they like, and the top ideas are pitched to management. Since its beginning, the Innovation Pipeline has engaged 130,000 employees and resulted in \$38 million in innovation investment according to [Forbes](#). Even if you can't copy that program exactly, the key is to have a process to regularly gather ideas as they arise and to ensure every employee knows that their ideas are encouraged and heard.



2. Vet ideas.

Getting ideas is one thing; judging them is another. Set up a structure that works for your organization—it may be a committee or a single executive serving as the "champion" for assessing ideas. It may help to have levels of approval so ideas work their way up, building momentum and buy-in along the way. Adobe is a good example. It developed a process to build a "culture of experimenting" with Kickbox, a toolkit that employees can use to submit and develop an idea. Each idea gets \$1,000 of company money, along with the employee's time to conduct research, talk to customers and develop the idea before executives pass judgment. Adobe says this process encourages "grass-roots innovation." Innovators complete a five-step process, then the idea can be presented to management for review. Having a vetting process demonstrates to employees that the organization takes ideas seriously, and ideas from everyone are reviewed and considered.



3. Decide on ideas.

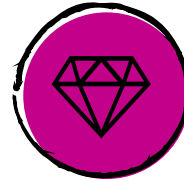
Entrepreneur and “Big Thinker” Elon Musk and his teams focus on what they call “moonshot” ideas—those that are big and outrageous. Ideas like building the world’s biggest rocket, the largest battery factory or the coolest electric car. He’s even combined ideas by shooting his cool electric car into space on his Falcon Heavy rocket. “Moonshot” ideas might be too big for your organization, but you have to decide. One way is to create a [checklist](#) that can help an organization fairly judge and select what’s a good idea for your company and what’s not. Ask: Is there a real need? Is the idea new or just an adaptation? What problems will the idea cause or solve—both internally and externally? Then, put the ideas into decision buckets: Do It, Explore It, Shelf It (for later), Pass for Now, for example. But even if an idea doesn’t make the cut, don’t throw it out. Maybe down the road it could be viable.



4. Give feedback on ideas.

A sure-fire morale killer for employees is to never hear back on the ideas they have submitted. It’s critical that leaders communicate regularly with all employees about innovation,

and especially with those who’ve submitted an idea. HubSpot co-founder and Chief Technology Officer [Dharmesh Shah](#) has a social media company account that he calls “Ask Dharmesh Anything.” Employees do, too. Think about ways to have several lines of communication open for idea feedback. And always follow up with employees who have taken the time to submit an idea. Be honest, genuine and specific, and be sure to encourage more ideas.



5. Reward the ideas culture.

It’s our instinct to reward employees with winning ideas, those that are implemented and get results. It is arguably equally, if not more important, to recognize and reward employees who are submitting ideas, whether the ideas are viable or not. Consider, perhaps, an award or recognition for consistency in submitting ideas or for the most innovative idea. It terms of how to recognize/reward, little and big things work. It can be as simple as a personal handwritten note, or a text or email message from leadership. Public accolades on internal social media platforms, group emails or even a formal “ideas award” program are all viable options. *The Motley Fool* enables employees to encourage each other within an online program that lets them give “gold” for a job well done. These virtual rewards can be turned into real rewards, like gift cards. Think about how you can adapt this idea to reward the “idea machines” in your organization who innovate ideas every day.

The goal is to keep the ideas flowing on a regular basis— from the bottom up. Focus on setting up a process that will work for your organization with the goal of fostering an ideas culture. It can be simple or more complex, but the key is to keep the lines of communication open with everyone— whether the ideas are groundbreaking or are those that must be killed. It’s leadership’s responsibility to let employees know that their ideas are valued and needed. Or, frankly, you’ll lose them.

For more information, please contact:

Melissa Jezior

 mjezior@eaglehillconsulting.com

 [@mjezior1](https://twitter.com/mjezior1)

 [linkedin.com/in/melissajeziior](https://www.linkedin.com/in/melissajeziior)

Susan Nealon

 snealon@eaglehillconsulting.com

 [@susanbnealon](https://twitter.com/susanbnealon)

 [linkedin.com/in/susan-nealon-7074224](https://www.linkedin.com/in/susan-nealon-7074224)