

Stealthstorming

Making Innovation Happen Under the Radar

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Stealthstorming (STELTH-sto:rm-ing) 1. *verb*: to surreptitiously attack or assault 2. *noun*: covert decisions and actions in an organization aimed at promoting innovation.

To drive innovation, many managers put their faith in fun workshops, blue-sky brainstorming and similar. But in fact, in a regular company, championing such flamboyant techniques can be dangerous to your career. The answer is to take a different approach, namely that of Stealthstorming.

Here is how it normally goes: An HR manager, challenged with making his or her organization more innovative, sets in motion a range of initiatives. A fun and energizing workshop is organized, facilitated by an external creativity expert. A framework is introduced, creating new terms to talk about innovation. Brainstorming tools are taught and wild ideas encouraged. The manager also starts some kind of online idea contest – “Submit your ideas for improving our company!” It looks like a great start on the journey towards a creative culture.

And then, after the initial excitement – comes the silence. The workshop, while it got fantastic feedback from everybody, doesn't seem to actually change anything. The brainstorming tools aren't used. The new innovation buzzwords are received with surprising coolness by the front-line employees. And with slowly dawning horror, the HR manager finds that the other top executives of the company have started to think of the HR unit not as a serious value add, but as the 'Department of Light Entertainment'.

These examples are not fictional; each of them have occurred in companies we have studied. In our role as academics and teachers at IESE Business School in Barcelona and New York, we have followed numerous managers in their quest to promote innovation, and one thing is clear: if you work in a regular company, taking the traditional 'brainstorming'



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approach to innovation can be not only counterproductive, but also dangerous to your personal credibility. As one manager put it, speaking under cover of anonymity: "In my company, being called creative is the kiss of death for your career." Brainstorming is not the solution; often, it is part of the problem.

The core issue lies with the way we think about creativity and innovation. Simply put, if you ask people to explain what a creative workplace looks like, they inevitably describe something that looks like a cross between Google and a kindergarten – with spectacular decor, artsy vibes, football tables and bring-your-pet-ferret-to-work policies. But that model, while working great for creative agencies and Silicon Valley strongholds, is often wrong for regular companies, where trying to 'go Google' is simply too contrary to the organization. The truth is that driving innovation is not about changing your culture to become Google; rather, it is to change the perception and the practices of creativity so they fit into your existing culture.

The answer is what we call Stealthstorming. Stealthstorming, in essence, is about making innovation happen under the radar. It is guerilla warfare, waged with ideas. It is a radical thinker dressed in a suit and a tie. It is when you abandon all the usual trappings of creativity – multi-coloured hats, flamboyant workshops, cheesy change management techniques – and sneak under the corporate defences to make it happen.

What Stealthstormers do

The successful stealthstormers we have studied follow some simple, if counterintuitive, rules when they make innovation happen. They embrace organizational politics; they seek mandates from the middle; they don't think art is the answer; they are sceptical of the spectacular; and sometimes, they deliberately avoid any mention of the word innovation.

1. Embrace the political side of innovation

Many people think of the typical innovator as someone who fights 'the system'; idealistic young firebrands who abhor the very idea of playing politics. But companies are inherently political, and innovators ignore this at their peril. Stealthstormers don't dismiss politics as being below them; rather, they proactively deal with it from Day 1 – because if used right, politics can work for you instead of against you.

Take Jordan Cohen, an American HR manager in Pfizer's New York office on 42nd street. In 2008, Cohen and his team launched pfizerWorks, a highly successful internal innovation that allowed Pfizer's employees to become radically more effective. As Cohen worked with getting his idea realized, he simultaneously dealt with the political aspects of the organization. By attracting in-house mentors, securing support, building small success stories, and deliberately minding the various internal stakeholders, Cohen and his team eventually managed to do what many consider an impossibility: creating a successful innovation from the bottom-up in a large company. When this was possible, it was because Cohen had years of experience working in the company, and had the ability to understand and navigate the political landscape.



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2. Get the mandate from the middle

Cohen's success with pfizerWorks also demonstrates the importance of having a mandate from above. Stealthstorming is not about going totally rogue, doing everything on your own like a corporate Mata Hari; the sad fact is, initiatives that lack support from above have very bad odds.

On the other hand, if you have an initiative in mind, going straight to the top of the company carries its own set of risks. Top-level managers are exposed to lots of untested ideas, and routinely reject the more innovative ones because they seem too risky or intangible. And even if you do gain the support of a senior sponsor, the complicated game of thrones taking place at the top can mean that your project is suddenly sidelined or is taken hostage in a political in-fight.

Instead, it can often be a good idea to build momentum gradually, seeking mandates from your immediate superiors and working your way up. As Cohen set out to start pfizerWorks,

he didn't go to the top first; rather, he started getting his immediate boss onboard, paving the way for making some simple tests of the idea. Then, using the data he gathered, he started getting more people interested, gradually building his base in the middle of the company. In this way, when Cohen finally presented his case to the Vice Chairman of Pfizer, he had strong backing from the lower levels, as well as persuasive data to show that his idea had real potential to succeed.

3. Don't confuse innovation with art

Innovation is often described as an art – but that association may not be well suited for the kind of innovation that is needed in our businesses.

Consider the challenge of training business people for creativity. One of the most interesting creativity studies in recent times was done by a team of researchers at the University of Oklahoma, as they tried to answer an important question: was creativity training actually useful? To figure it out, they did a so-called meta-study, a highly reliable method in which they reviewed and compiled 70 prior studies on the area.

Their first finding was that creativity training was indeed useful – which should be good news, considering how many companies have invested in such training programs. Significantly, however, their study also showed that training which was artistic in nature – think group painting and similar – was in fact less effective than training focused on business problems. People may well associate creativity with art, but in reality, skills learned during fingerpaint sessions are not all that applicable in business settings. As a stealthstormer, you need to train people on problems that look like something they could actually encounter back in the office. Artistic activities should not necessarily be abolished in training programs; they can still be great for teambuilding purposes. The point is to be aware of their limitations when it comes to fostering real business innovation.

4. Don't confuse experience with effect

A dirty secret of the HR business is that many line employees perceive HR as a limiting rather than enabling factor – and HR managers aren't blind to this. So for HR managers, there can be a great temptation to organize spectacular, fun-filled innovation events that stand out from the daily business, in order to play a positive and enabling role in the company. And the temptation becomes stronger because such events tend to get very positive feedback; after all, who doesn't love a day away from the office, exercising their brains in the company of expert facilitators?

Having a fun experience with your co-workers is certainly a good thing. But the risk is that instead of looking at results, 'creating a good experience' becomes the key metric that innovation leaders focus on. And when that happens – when experience is mistaken for effect – then managers are inevitably driven towards creating ever more spectacular events, even if they don't make a difference to the bottom line. And paradoxically, spectacular methods can be counterproductive – because the more spectacular the tools, the less likely they are to be used in the course of everyday work.

Stealthstormers don't use flamboyant techniques or methods that require special tools: they rely instead on very simple tools and habits, small tweaks to procedure that can make a big difference. Consider Procter&Gamble, where they implemented a simple rule in meetings: when discussing an issue, the most senior manager speaks last. A minimally disruptive idea – and yet, it made meetings much more innovative by making sure that junior people with novel ideas were also heard. It is by such simple measures that real innovation can start to gain a foothold in an otherwise innovation-hostile workplace.

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5. Beware of innovation fatigue

When managers go on innovation courses, they often come back with not just new ideas, but also new terminology – say, a framework of innovation types or similar. These terms are useful because they give managers a common language when they are to put together a plan. And many managers become so enthusiastic about the new terms and concepts that they think it natural to spread the new terms in the organization as well, getting their own employees to adopt them.

Often, that is not a good idea. First of all, the terminology will not carry the same weight with employees who haven't worked with them intensively through a three-day seminar. Second, the diffusion of the new terms can sometimes become an end in itself – and can lead managers to think the goal is attained when all their people have adopted the new terminology. Too often, though, such terms become packaging; employees simply use the new terms to describe their usual behaviour in new ways. In fact, our experience has shown that in some cases, you are better off NOT creating any kind of new terminology – or even mentioning innovation in the first place.

Consider the experience of a management team we worked with a few years ago. The team had received a strong innovation mandate from the corporate leadership, and as they returned from an innovation program at IESE Business School, the Country Manager gathered the team in his office to discuss how to make innovation happen. Lots of ideas came up; many of them involved some kind of new framework. At this point, though, the Country Manager's Personal Assistant interrupted them: "I'm sorry, but I don't think you should call this an innovation initiative. We have had several of those in the past, with rather mixed results, and I don't think people will react positively to another one".

As a consequence of receiving that critical piece of input, the management team decided to ditch the top-down, concept-driven approach and instead implement a more natural, employee-driven project that was entirely devoid of innovation buzzwords. As a result, they went on to lead a very successful cultural change that became known throughout the organization – a result that would probably not have happened, had they positioned their initiative as an innovation project.

In conclusion: if you believe your company needs Stealthstorming rather than brainstorming, we suggest that you DON'T start spreading the word about it. Rather, keeping in mind the advice mentioned above, we suggest that you start thinking about how to make innovation happen – not with workshops, idea competitions and tired comparisons to dinosaurs, but by making simple, subtle changes to your everyday actions, getting innovation in under the radar. Sometimes, it is the silent revolutions that have the real staying power.



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