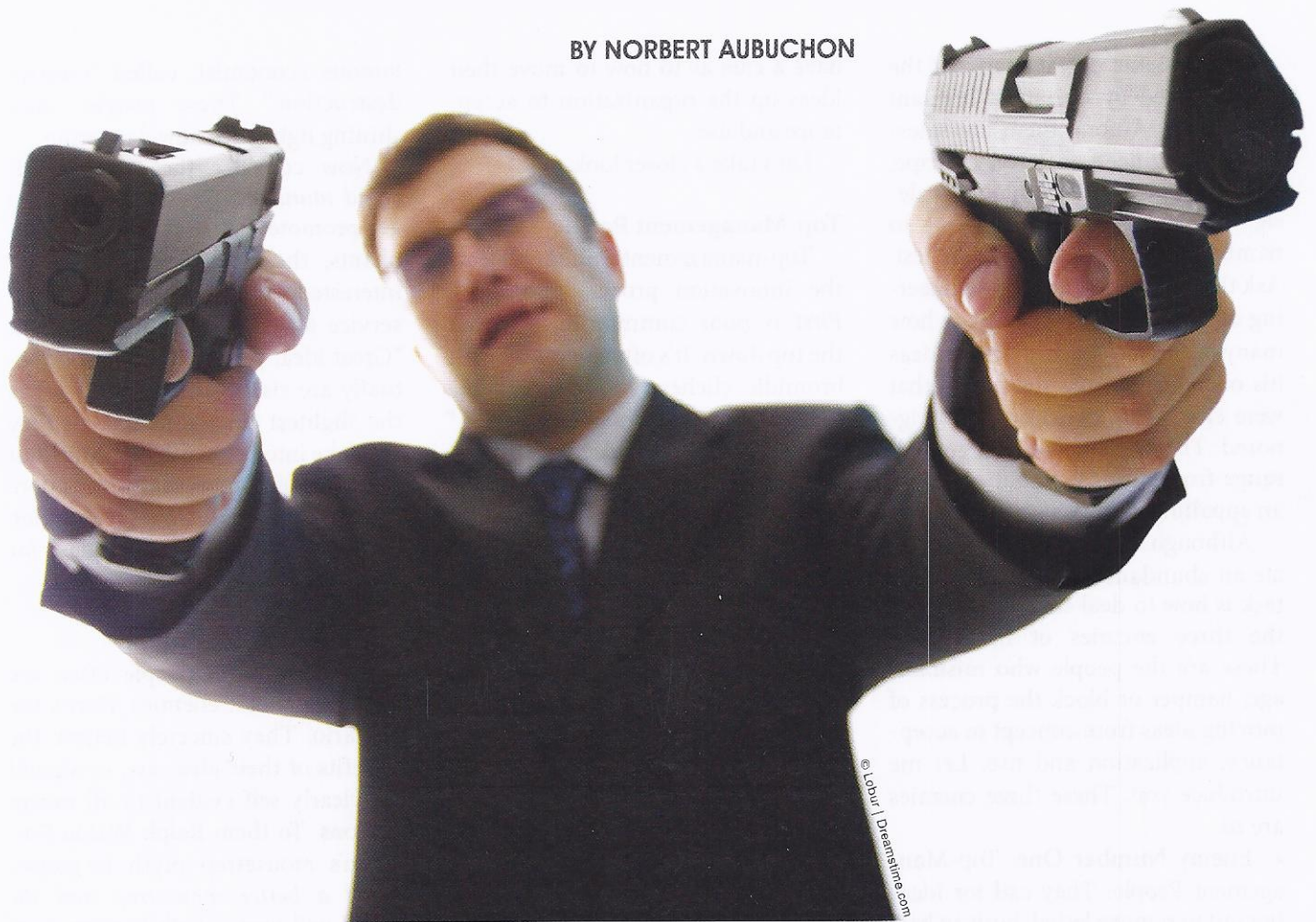


The Deadly Enemies of Innovation

BY NORBERT AUBUCHON



If you believe that American innovation will continue to provide us with world leadership, don't be too sure. American industry is facing a double whammy: Innovations from abroad are increasing rapidly, and our own made-in-America corporate misbehavior kills off ideas that should happen but won't happen — ever. As a manufacturers' representative, why should this be important to you? It is because you need to focus on the organizational mechanisms that can defeat the ideas you propose to customers and prospects.



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The rate of change is accelerating at warp speed.

Our systems defeat many of the ideas created by our most brilliant Americans. Among them are salespeople, engineers of every stripe, chemists, physicists, biologists, designers, geologists, IT people — to name a few. Doubtful? Try this test. Ask the head of research or engineering of any substantial company how many of the serious, important ideas his or her group has developed that were either shot down or quietly ignored. The answers you will get will range from four to six out of ten — an appalling loss. What's your score?

Although we Americans generate an abundance of good ideas, the task is how to deal successfully with the three enemies of innovation. These are the people who mismanage, hamper or block the process of moving ideas from concept to acceptance, application and use. Let me introduce you. These three enemies are *us*.

- **Enemy Number One:** Top-Management People: They call for ideas but fail to remove lethal, built-in barriers in the organization.
- **Enemy Number Two:** Certain Middle-Management People: They regularly and skillfully ambush proposed ideas that threaten either the status quo or personal goals. Have you had that happen?
- **Enemy Number Three:** Idea People Themselves: These are the brilliant professional-level people who generate great ideas but don't

have a clue as to how to move their ideas up the organization to acceptance and use.

Let's take a closer look.

Top-Management People

Top-management often defeats the innovation process two ways: *First* is poor communication from the top down. It's often one-way with bromidic clichés. “*We need all the ideas we can get from our people.*” Obviously unbelievable to the troops, everyone knows that no top management group needs all the ideas it can get. Empty generalities dampen both creativity and innovation. *Second*, top-management often fails to recognize and break down the barriers created by Enemy Number Two — certain obstructionists lurking in middle-management.

Middle-Management People

Certain middle-management people come in different “flavors.” Mixed in with hardworking, constructive people are two destructive types: The *this-job-oriented managers* — five to ten years from retirement, their career jobs seem stable; but promotion prospects are zilch. New ideas are terrifying. They mean change. Change means job jeopardy. Their standard tactic: Defend the status quo, “*We've tried that before. It won't work here. Not possible. Competition got killed with that idea....*” They fear what Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950), the

famous economist, called “creative destruction.” These people, once shining lights, are now dangerous.

Now consider the *next-job-oriented managers*. Their agenda is to get promoted. Period. Skilled sycophants, these people appear open, interested, cooperative, giving lip service to progress and innovation. “Great idea, yes sireee!” But they actually are risk averse. If an idea has the slightest chance of failure, they will fake interest and cooperation but quietly avoid any actual association. Then, if the idea seems a sure winner, they will make a last minute dash for the bandwagon. Tricky.

Idea People Themselves

These brilliant people often are their own worst enemies. Here's the scenario. They sincerely believe the benefits of their ideas are, or should be, clearly self evident to all except morons. To them Ralph Waldo Emerson's mousetrap myth is gospel: *Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door.* Therefore the notion that ideas need to be promoted or sold is deemed not necessary. Worse, it is anathema. To them the idea of them selling anything is not just demeaning, it's downright lowbrow — Willy Loman stuff. Even worse, most of these highly creative people haven't a clue about the selling process in the first place. Thus thousands of excellent ideas are stillborn.

So what should top-management do:

- First, management needs to recognize the problem and get involved with the problem. How? Talk candidly with key employees, one on one. Find out what happens to ideas lost within the organization. Are they poorly presented? Do they fail to meet needs? Why were they shot down before being seriously considered? Identify and deal with the middle-management blockers. Get to the truth.
- Second, convince employees, especially the bright, technically trained people that their ideas need to be sold up the organization. Then teach the persuasion skills and strategies they need to become successful advocates of their ideas. The bounty starts here.
- Third, start giving solid, reasoned direction about areas of interest. Define problems, emphasize corporate needs, and, at all costs, keep the minds of middle-management open.
- Fourth, establish a new culture that is designed to nurture budding ideas. Keep your bright people enthusiastic and encouraged. Reward failure as well as success. Very important.

The rate of change is accelerating at warp speed. Innovation should be high on the agenda of most organizations. In short, we Americans cannot afford to continue to lose a large percentage of our ideas. If our management people don't take heed, recognize and stop the loss, foreign interests will continue to snatch opportunity after opportunity away with lightning speed.

Wake up, America! It's your call.



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