



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Killer Phrases

There are lots of ways that you can kill creativity in an organization. It starts off with the way we communicate with one another when a new idea is being proposed. The following are phrases that have been heard in conversations. Some of these conversations are private just between two people. In some cases it superior to subordinate. Sometimes it is peer to peer. They can even occur in a group session. Other conversations are much more public such as a staff meeting, or a teaching or presentation opportunity and an event where someone is either advocating or reacting to change. Personally, I've also heard these types of statements at City Council meetings, fire district board meetings and even in the house halls of legislature.

Ask yourself this question; have you heard these terms yourself? Or, have you used these terms yourself?

Well, that's a good idea, but....

That is against company policy....

That's all right in theory, but...

You have to be practical...

That cost too much...

We are not ready to start that now...

We need to return this to the committee for more study...

It's not in the budget...

That's not part of your job...

Let's take a survey first...

Let's set on it for a while...

That's not our problem...

The boss won't go for it...

The old-timers won't go along with it...

A simply too hard to administer...

We have been doing it this way for a long time and it works...

If it's such a good idea, why hasn't someone suggested before...

This is too much ahead of its time...

Let's put that on the agenda that for a future meeting...

We've never done it that way before...

Is anybody else doing it now...

The second form of killing creativity is the exact opposite of these killer phrases. What I'm referring to here is the idea that you remain silent on a good idea and allow it to wither without support debate, or



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healthy discussion. The sign of a really healthy organization is its ability to process change. One of the ways this behavior is often manifested is through the use of body language. If I were to make up another list of the ways you can kill an idea with your body language I'm sure I would come up with things you have seen. It would include such things as arms folded across the chest, lacking eye contact, supported by either a smart remark or a sigh... To quote George Bernard Shaw: "Progress is impossible without change - and anyone that cannot change their mind cannot change anything."

One of the primary skill sets for a really effective leader is their ability to listen to new ideas without prejudice and to be able to resolve conflict between dueling ideas. This often requires that every single idea be given an ample amount of time or consideration before being thrown onto the trash heap. The next time that you are presiding over a meeting start writing down the number of times that killer phrases are used as opposed to the number of times that individuals exchange information before deep-sixing an incipient idea.

Lastly, I do want to give the idea that all ideas are good either. I will readily admit that I have heard some real whoppers in my career. What I am suggesting is that handling of ideas is not something that should be treated trivially. The first step to avoiding the use of killer phrases is to practice listening skills. I learned a long time ago that one of the ways of keeping a nascent idea alive long enough for it to obtain some traction is to use the phrase "that's interesting, tell me more." Another phrase I have often used is: "where did that idea come from?" The idea in this case was to see if it was an individual's thought process or was actually based upon practices in some other organization. Ideas that have already been planted somewhere else are sometimes easier to utilize than those that have to survive this seedling stage within your own organization.

Recently, I read the life story of Johnny Appleseed. Most people do not understand that his quest for spreading trees throughout the country was not so much based on Apple's as it was on the spreading of a religious doctrine. The apple was what attracted the audience, but it was the word that he was leaving behind it really resulted in the growth.

If the culture of your organization is to be a place where good ideas go to die, then it's possible that of the organization will wither over time. You play a key role as a leader in determining whether ideas are given a fair chance or they are doomed to extinction before being allowed to sprout. Generally speaking, we prize innovation and creativity in society, but we often behave within our own organizations as if new ideas are threats to our culture.

As long as we're speaking about apples, I would submit that the list of killer phrases that I used at the outset of this piece was hardly ever uttered at Apple Computer. In an environment in which competition can drastically alter economic outcomes, organizations that can foster ideation and creation tend to be survivors. Those that can't do that become secondary influences and lose their competitive edges.



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The study of this process is a lot more complex than we can cover in an article. This field of endeavor includes facilitation skills, avoiding groupthink, knowing how to brainstorm without prejudice, and a host of other ideas on making your organization more responsive to change. I would suggest that all of us have both built-in resistance to change and a desire to see it occur. While the fire service is commonly referred to as "traditional" there is ample proof in the fire service that we have processed change very well. We aren't using steamers any longer, and wearing breathing apparatus is not considered a sign of weakness. You can't tell me that we are incapable of making change. The only thing that we can do is to resist the change until it overwhelms us. And that it should be the job of a leader, to place an emphasis on the changes that need to be made to improve and perfect our profession.

So, as my old gunnery Sgt. used to say, "Listen up". I would add to that, listen up and learn.