

Creativity Is Not Enough

By Theodore Levitt

Creativity is often touted as a miraculous road to organizational growth and affluence. But new ideas can hinder rather than help a company if they are put forward irresponsibly.

Too often, the creative types who generate a proliferation of ideas confuse creativity with practical innovation. They usually pepper their managers with intriguing but short memoranda that lack details about what is at stake or how the new ideas should be implemented. They pass off onto others the responsibility for getting down to brass tacks.

In this classic HBR article from 1963, Levitt emphasizes that the person with a great new idea must recognize that managers are already bombarded with problems. He must act responsibly by including in the proposal at least a minimal indication of the costs, risks, manpower, and time the idea may involve.

Conformity and rigidity are necessary for corporations to function. Indeed, the purpose of an organization is to achieve the order and conformity necessary to do a particular job. Otherwise there would be chaos and decay. But even then, large companies do have important attributes that actually facilitate innovation. For one thing, big businesses distribute risk, making it safer for individuals to break new ground. For another, bigness and group decision making function as stabilizers. Stability encourages people to risk presenting ideas that might rock the boat.