

You probably think that the barriers to innovation are negative elements of your organization — that is, the wrong people, behaviors, and processes. But the most subtle and pernicious barriers to innovation may be the seemingly positive myths about what has made your organization successful.

Every organization has myths about who are the great leaders, what are the behaviors to admire and imitate, what business you are in, what customers want, what are the best skills to run a process. Whenever someone proposes an idea, it is explicitly or implicitly screened with the myths. Unfortunately, the competitive landscape changes, but the myths don't.

Consider Bang & Olufsen, the Danish manufacturer of music players and speakers. Its people have believed that its success depended on achieving the ultimate pureness of sound, creating beautiful objects, delighting users through great physical product interfaces, and thinking of music as a home experience. As a result, it has viewed architects and industrial designers as the best interpreters of customers' aspirations.

These myths impeded Bang & Olufsen from reacting to the rise of MP3 digital encoding. MP3 technology has radically changed the world of music by making music more accessible, shareable, and embedded in the net. But MP3 conflicted with B&O's beliefs because it downgraded the quality of sound, replaced nice speakers with small headphones and computers, made the digital sphere more relevant than the physical objects, and made listening to music a dynamic on-the-go experience rather than a static at-home experience.

As a result, B&O was slow in capturing the opportunity of this "outlandish" technology. Even when MP3 eventually became dominant, B&O's myths remained the same: Its people accepted MP3 as something they "had" to use, rather than something they "wanted" to use. Today the Danish company is still struggling to cope with the digital revolution.

Myths are pernicious barriers to innovation because they are so deeply and silently embedded in an organization that they almost hypnotize it. I've been recently inspired by *I miti del nostro tempo* (The Myths of Our Time), a book by the Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti. He says that "myths are ideas that own and govern us by means that are not logical but psychological, and therefore are rooted in the depths of our soul. These are ideas that we have mythologized because they give no problems, they facilitate judgment; in a word, they reassure us."

Galimberti talks of individuals. But the same dynamics happen in organizations.

What's the remedy? Galimberti's advice is that because "myths prevent us from deeply understanding the world ... we must therefore put our myths under critical scrutiny..."

I couldn't agree more. You need to challenge the untouchable myths of your organization. The next time someone proposes an idea that looks wrong or outlandish, try the following:

Identify the myth to be challenged.

Myths are often connected to the parameters you use to judge an idea. So identify the parameter that makes this idea wrong. For example, imagine you are a leader in a corporation that produces industrial robots and someone proposes the bizarre idea of using robotic arms in amusement parks to swirl people around on scary rides. This idea conflicts with a major myth in your industry: Value comes from safety, which involves keeping robots and humans apart.

Now, instead of challenging the idea, try the opposite: Challenge the myth. For example, what if there is a value in industrial robots being dangerous? What if there is a value in bringing humans close to them?

Seek an outside perspective.

Given that myths are deeply rooted into your organization, it's hard for you to criticize them. You need to look at the myth through third parties' eyes. So ask someone outside your company to answer the questions posed above. You might ask designers of amusement parks or experts on virtual games about the value of using robots in amusement-park rides. They will tell you that people in amusement parks value the feeling of defying scary machines and the unpredictable movements of robotic arms.

Reconsider the outlandish idea.

Be nice to your myths; the purpose of this exercise is not to destroy the myths but to reinterpret them. Leverage the idea of a robot being dangerous by creating a scary ride with fearsome sounds. But of course, make sure the ride is totally safe.

The outcome of this critical analysis of the myth may be surprising. Indeed, nowadays there are more than 250 "Robocoasters" in amusement parks around the world — to the delight of teenagers and the bewilderment of traditional robotic manufacturers who judged this idea as outlandish.

Fuente: HBR Blog Network, by Roberto Verganti