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Three Types of People to Fire Immediately

Want a more innovative company? Get rid of these folks.
Today

By [G. Michael Maddock and Raphael Louis Vitón](#)

*“I wanted a happy culture. So I fired all the unhappy people.”
—A very successful CEO (who asked not to be named)*

We (your authors) teach our children to work hard and never, ever give up. We teach them to be grateful, to be full of wonder, to expect good things to happen, and to search for literal and figurative treasure on every beach, in every room, and in every person.

But some day, when the treasure hunt is over, we’ll also teach them to fire people. Why? After working with the most inventive people in the world for two decades, we’ve discovered the value of a certain item in the leadership toolbox: the pink slip.

Show of hands: How many of you out there in Innovationland have gotten the “what took you so long?” question from your staff when you finally said goodbye to a teammate who was seemingly always part of problems instead of solutions?

We imagine a whole bunch of hands. (Yep, ours went up, too.)

These people—and we going to talk about three specific types in a minute—passive-aggressively block innovation from happening and will suck the energy out of any organization.

When confronted with any of the following three people—and you have found it impossible to change their ways, say goodbye.

1. The Victims

“Can you believe what they want us to do now? And of course we have no time to do it. I don’t get paid enough for this. The boss is clueless.”

Victims are people who see problems as occasions for persecution rather than challenges to overcome. We all play the role of victim occasionally, but for some, it has turned into a way of life. These people feel persecuted by humans, processes, and inanimate objects with equal ease—they almost seem to enjoy it. They are often angry,

usually annoyed, and almost always complaining. Just when you think everything is humming along perfectly, they find something, anything, to complain about. At Halloween parties, they're Eeyore, the gloomy, pessimistic donkey from the *Winnie the Pooh* stories—regardless of the costume they choose.

Victims aren't looking for opportunities; they are looking for problems. Victims can't innovate.

So if you want an [innovative team](#), you simply can't include victims. Fire the victims. (Note to the HR department: Victims are also the most likely to feel the company has maliciously terminated them regardless of cause. They will often go looking for someone—anyone—who will agree that you have treated them unjustly. Lawyers are often left to play this role. So have your documentation in order before you let victims go, because chances are you will hear from their attorneys.

2. The Nonbelievers

"Why should we work so hard on this? Even if we come up with a good idea, the boss will probably kill it. If she doesn't, the market will. I've seen this a hundred times before."

We love the Henry Ford quote: "If you think you can or think you cannot, you are correct." The difference between the winning team that makes industry-changing innovation happen and the losing one that comes up short is a lack of willpower. Said differently, the winners really believed they could do it, while the losers doubted it was possible.

In our experience, we've found the link between believing and succeeding incredibly powerful and real. Great leaders understand this. They find and promote believers within their organizations. They also understand the cancerous effect that nonbelievers have on a team and will cut them out of the organization quickly and without regret.

If you are a leader who says your mission is to innovate, but you have a staff that houses nonbelievers, you are either a lousy leader or in denial. Which is it? You deserve the staff you get. Terminate the nonbelievers.

3. The Know-It-Alls

"You people obviously don't understand the business we are in. The regulations will not allow an idea like this, and our stakeholders won't embrace it. Don't even get me started on our IT infrastructure's inability to support it. And then there is the problem of"

The best innovators are learners, not knowers. The same can be said about innovative cultures; they are learning cultures. The leaders who have built these cultures, either through intuition or experience, know that in order to discover, they must eagerly seek out things they don't understand and jump right into the deep end of the pool. They must

fail fearlessly and quickly and then learn and share their lessons with the team. When they behave this way, they empower others around them to follow suit—and presto, a culture of discovery is born and nurtured.

In school, the one who knows the most gets the best grades, goes to the best college, and gets the best salary. On the job, the person who can figure things out the quickest is often celebrated. And unfortunately, it is often this smartest, most-seasoned employee who eventually becomes expert in using his or her knowledge to explain why things are impossible rather than possible.

This employee should be challenged, retrained, and compensated for failing forward. But if this person's habits are too deeply ingrained to change, you must let him or her go. Otherwise, this individual will unwittingly keep your team from seeing opportunity right under your noses. The folks at Blockbuster didn't see Netflix ([NFLX](#))'s ascendancy. The encyclopedia companies didn't see Google ([GOOG](#)) coming. But the problem of expert blindness existed well before the Internet.

Two of our favorites from rinkworks.com: “This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.” —Western Union internal memo, 1876.

And “The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?” —David Sarnoff's associates in response to his urgings for investment in the radio in the 1920s.

At one point in his career, [Thomas A. Edison](#) had dozens of inventors working for him at the same time. He charged each with the task of failing forward and sharing the learning from each discovery. All of them needed to believe that they were part of something big. You want the same sort of people.

You don't want the victims, nonbelievers, or know-it-alls. It is up to you to make sure they take their anti-innovative outlooks elsewhere.

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