

Six shadows



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Too many organisations find unleashing their creative forces difficult.

Chris Nichols and Chris West run Ashridge's Innovation and Intrapreneurship workshops. They believe that companies really can learn better ways to generate ideas that go on to work in practice.

Creativity – the cognitive (and group) process by which ‘newness’ is developed – and *innovation* – the putting of newness into practice – are both basic, natural processes, growing out of our innate curiosity and our propensity to improve things. Almost all of us create and innovate in many aspects of our lives without giving the act a second thought: we decorate houses, plant gardens, play with our children, plan holidays. But in the workplace, individual creativity often gets stuck, and innovation becomes the stuff of corporate myth, trumpeted in corporate statements but not experienced in the daily lives of employees.

Six shadows are at work. They create ignorance and fear and, like all shadows, lack any substance once examined. Yet, unexamined and unchallenged, they exercise huge power, standing between you, your team and successful innovation. In our workshops we see individuals, leaders and teams question these shadows and develop and implement ideas they never dreamt they were capable of.

Spotting the shadows

Our work has led us to cluster innovation failures into the three broad zones of failure. It is in these zones that the six destructive shadows are found:

In Zone 1, organisations never even get started on the creative road. They either deny the

need to nurture innovation, or – often due to past experiences – conclude that they would like to do ‘creative stuff’ but cannot.

In Zone 2, organisations buy into the creative imperative, and may go to great efforts to back innovation, making statements of intent and enshrining innovation as a corporate goal. However, they then sabotage this by avoiding the real process of creativity, with its attendant descent into randomness and uncertainty. As a result, nothing really new happens. The company can end up worse off than before, back in Zone 1 believing creativity is another fad or for someone else.

In Zone 3, new ideas have been generated and tried, but the failure rate is uncomfortably high. Organisations stuck in this zone often have great creative capability, but fall down on innovation. Ultimately, newness must pay its way. Once again, there is a danger of long-term disillusion.

In Zone 1 we see:

The shadow of *denying the need*, through complacency or excuse making. It's a rare business where nothing needs improving. The empirical evidence is clear: effective innovation is part of the recipe for success.

The shadow of *incapacity*. "We can't do this stuff." Creativity is often equated with the creative arts. This is profoundly untrue, but it leads many people who are actually highly creative in their personal and professional lives to believe they are not creative. A fear of the whole notion and process can follow, especially if a few creativity techniques have been tried but not connected to the right outcomes.

In Zone 2, the shadows are different. A process is in hand, but good quality results come too rarely or not at all. These shadows are about avoiding the real mechanisms of creativity:

The shadow of *narrow-sight*. We all have perceptual filters, screens through which we view the world. They become part of the corporate genetic code, the way people in organisations make sense of things. But they can also cause those people to reject exactly

the data they need to stimulate creativity; either by blocking out the need, or by starving the feedstock of new thinking.

The shadow of *the premature Eureka!* – the drive to get to conclusions too soon. Business rewards decisive leaders. However, finding the creative solution, realising the previously unseen opportunity, requires time spent in the creative whirl of possibility. Sometimes the hardest thing is to prevent teams taking the data they have and leaping straight to a decision, without ever spending time in any creative process at all.

In Zone 3, we see the shadows that kill the effective implementation of newness. They are:

The shadow of *past failure*. Sometimes teams have a history of generating ideas that don't work. The ideas sound good, but nobody buys them in the end – often after a great deal of time

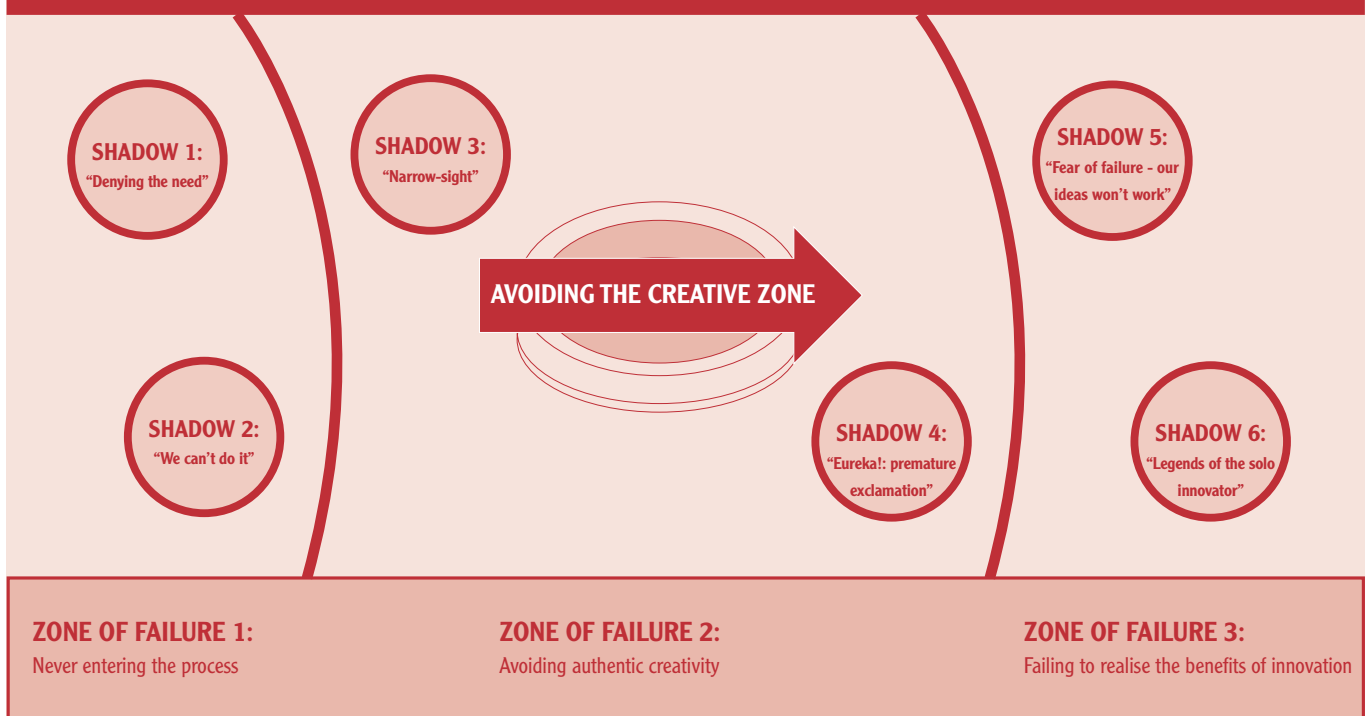


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FIGURE 1: AVOIDING INNOVATION – THE SHADOWS OF FAILURE



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and money has been invested. This heritage can be a terrible block to further investment in innovation, giving ammunition to people who told you so, as well as to people with more genuine concerns about the cost of past failures. This is where we use the methodology explained in the bestselling book, *The Beermat Entrepreneur* by Mike Southon and Chris West.¹ This presents a way of testing ideas quickly, cheaply and with a minimum of fuss. This methodology is based on what happens in the busy, uncertain markets where start-up entrepreneurs operate.

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The shadow of the *lonesome innovator*. There is a myth that innovation is a solo sport. It isn't; using the right process, teams will generate and develop ideas better than solo innovators – and implement them, of course.

We suspect that many readers will be able to place their company or business unit in one or other of these zones. They may even find the shadows oddly familiar. The good news is that the whole experience can be very different if you blow away the six stifling shadows. We have developed some very practical and effective ways of doing that.

Blowing away the shadows

We work with the model of healthy creativity and innovation sketched in Figure 2. Creativity is not a mechanical process, so this figure is highly simplified. But showing it this way helps to illustrate how emergent and chaotic processes can fit together. Let's look at the process in more detail.

Step 1: Jumping in: The organisation in denial of need is the hardest to crack.

Fortunately, total denial is rare. There is plenty of evidence of the need to innovate. The literature from the academic to the polemic provides a compelling case for creative and alert strategy making.² And if you are sceptical of the written word, your organisation will be facing pressure to improve, from investors, from service users, from the heat of competition.

Where past negative experience is the obstacle to entering the process, an act of faith is needed. Once teams begin to experience the workshop, their fears that they cannot do it, or that they won't benefit, evaporate in the face of the clear experience that they can and do.

We have never found denial of need in any organisation that has a healthy strategic process. And we have never found doubts about creative capability in any organisation that has a strong capability to hold good quality conversations.

Denial and doubts are obstacles that occur when the strategy process is stunted – truncated, ritualised into a planning round or purely analytical. Where organisations honestly survey their environment and stakeholder needs, and where individuals have a genuine dialogue, these early, Zone 1 shadows disappear. In our workshops, the experience of openness and dialogue allows teams to experience the power of authentic strategic work, sometimes for the first time. This is in itself powerful learning.

Step 2: Generating genuine creativity: Zone 2 failure comes from the twin shadows of narrow-sight – the failure of information and/or weak dialogue – and premature judgement, leaping out of the creative process too soon.

Narrow-sight: Without high quality conversations, creativity cannot flourish. Ideas are often generated through sharing perspectives, an act of thinking together, and are always enriched by group building and

development. Low quality dialogue simply builds obstacles, not ideas. Quality, creative dialogue depends on both having the ability to access diverse and challenging data and having the skills to debate it in conversation with others.

Accessing good data is the easy part.

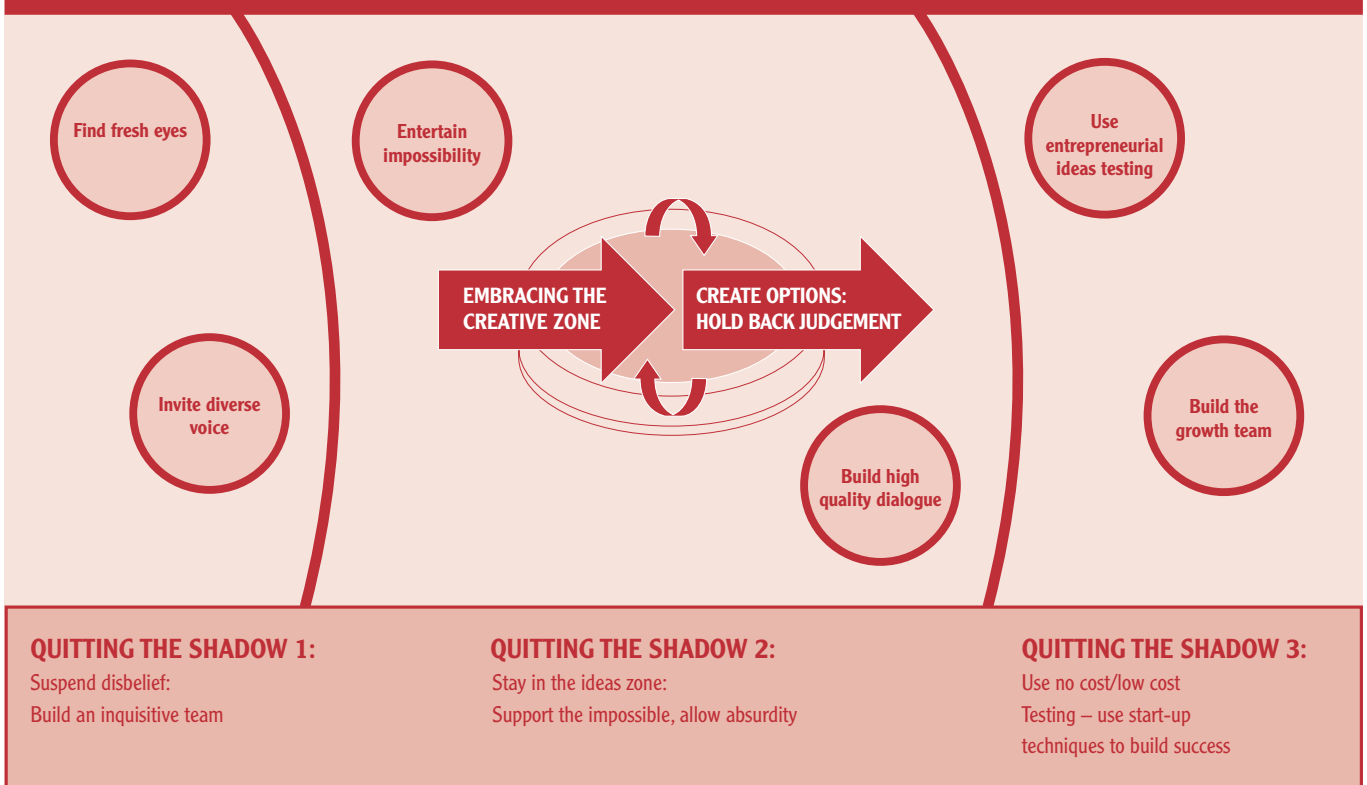
Individuals can widen their field of view by using time creatively: using airport down-time to read more widely for example, or simply picking up a magazine you would not ordinarily read and asking what this view of the world teaches you. More structurally, good strategic process involves a wide variety of dissident voices and themes in the strategic thinking. Using creative devices such as role play and imagination excursions can enrich and feed discussion.

What really matters, however, is the way in which the group handles the information in

Denial and doubts are obstacles that occur when the strategy process is stunted...

conversation. Often teams lack practice, tools and the will to create an effective debate. But the value of diversity only exists where difference is valued and expressed in dialogue. Exploring how differences of personal psychological preference play out in dialogue, in thinking style and in the types of evidence sought and trusted, helps groups to value difference and enter into better discussions. We use a variety of tools to explore the impact of difference, such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, trait tools, and the Innovation Potential Indicator.

FIGURE 2: QUITTING THE SHADOWS: A POWERFUL CREATIVE PROCESS



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To encourage appreciation of individual creative styles we often use the Five Faces of Genius model, developed by Annette Moser-Wellman. This shows individuals the creative potential of five styles of thinking and acting: visioning, observing, fusion, simplification and absurdity. Once teams have seen that individuals have different styles and strengths, and that each of the strengths contributes differently to generating creative ideas, the quality of interaction improves and, with it, the capacity to think creatively in the group. (Sometimes we also include work on the practical toolkit of effective dialogue – listening skills, intervention styles – where this is required by the group's need at the time.)

We see amazing progress in building richness in group creative thinking within a few hours of workshop experimentation.

Even with a sponsor, a lone innovator will fail.

Eureka! The curse of premature exclamation: An effective creative process requires that time is spent allowing for creativity. Many times, we have seen teams trying to rush to outcomes as fast as possible.

This is a way to stay safe: the mind stays safely in the known, avoiding the tumbling and disorientating experience of creativity. But it makes no progress. Fortunately, there are many well known creativity tools and perspectives to help people delay this leap and allow their minds to entertain creative absurdity and remain in the creative space long enough for real newness to emerge.

Which creativity tools are best? Many readers will be familiar with the techniques of Edward de Bono³ and Roger von Oech⁴, but any favourite techniques of the team in the workshop can be used. Among the most effective group approaches is some simple street theatre. It's not nearly as terrifying as it sounds.

We divide the group into teams (four if possible), and get each group to think about a very specific view of creativity and innovation. There are many views available, but we often use these:

A systematic view, such as that advocated by Peter Drucker, which holds that innovation comes from disciplined process – the systematic asking of certain questions⁵

An analytical view of process mapping and value plotting, such as that proposed by Kim Chan and Mauborgne⁶

An observational view, such as Leonard and Rayport's techniques of empathetic design⁷

A radical organisational view, such as Robert Sutton's weird rules approach.⁸

We then get the team to work with metaphors for, rather than their actual, organisational issues. Using a metaphor rather than the actual problem frees the participants from the constraints they believe prevent them from addressing the difficulty within the organisation. Later, when we apply the outcomes back to the actual organisational issue, very interesting insights emerge which often result in interesting ways to evade previously threatening obstacles.

In a brief period, a few hours of workshop time, this concentrated immersion in the creative process delivers powerful group creativity that goes a long, long way beyond brainstorming. We commonly see groups create ideas they never

believed they could generate and individuals growing visibly in their own faith in their personal creative capability. More important still, the seeds of real innovation – putting creativity into practice – have been sown. This propels us into Zone 3.

Step 3: Bringing customers to dreamland:

The fear that an idea won't work must be countered – not by a blanket assertion that it will, but a clear set of milestones against which its progress can be measured. This is the essence of the *Beermat* methodology, which sets a series of hurdles over which an innovation has to jump on its way to success. These hurdles mirror the hurdles faced by an entrepreneur in a start-up. The first of these is *innovator enthusiasm* – the new idea must be understood and loved by an innovator.

Innovators are individuals with the skills and the desire to make new ideas happen – they are the same as intrapreneurs in the classic definition.⁹ Many inventors, by contrast, are not innovators, lacking the nous or desire to make their ideas commercial or corporate reality.

A second key hurdle is that the innovator finds a mentor, or sponsor, for the idea within the company. This is essential because without the protection of such a person, the new idea will almost inevitably be shot down by sceptics. Failure to attract such an individual probably means that the idea is poor or that the innovator lacks what it takes to drive the idea.

A third hurdle is the finding of a real, paying customer for the idea. This is the most important hurdle of all and was the one most ignored during the dot-com boom.

Entrepreneurs operate in markets where high uncertainty is the norm. Nobody knows if a product, service or process will fly until customers are asked to dig into their pockets for it. Even high technology products are

subject to this iron rule: if an innovation has a huge lead time, it is incumbent on the innovator to find a strategic customer early in the process, who will bear most of the cost in return for exclusive or first use. This sounds a high hurdle: and it is. A new product must solve real customer issues (and have a decent chance of working) to clear it. Clever technology that just turns out to be a solution looking for a problem will not do so, nor should it. As most innovations are not totally radical, this hurdle is less fearsome than it might appear.¹⁰

Initially, in a workshop, teams are invited to speculate on who would sponsor a new product, service or process, and who would be the first customer. This speculation will later be turned into reality.

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Step 4: Solo, so long: The myth of the

lonesome innovator continues to bedevil the topic. It is false, but behind its falsity lies another crucial test for an idea. Can the innovator gather a team behind it? Even with a sponsor, a lone innovator will fail.

In *The Beermat Entrepreneur*, the authors talk of the need for a Balanced Business Team of entrepreneur (here, innovator) and four 'cornerstones', skilled professionals in sales, finance, delivery and technical innovation.

Within the corporation, a similar team needs

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to be behind the idea. The need for sales input is obvious (marketing people may apply for this post, but they must understand that their prime job will not be strategic but person-to-person qualification, negotiation and closing). Similarly, a mean streak is more important than City sophistication for the finance cornerstone: the new idea must bring in revenue soon and do so at as low a cost as possible.

Once again, in the workshop the teams formed may be hypothetical – though it's amazing how collaborations begun in comparative play can lead to partnerships that then go out into the workplace and achieve great things.

Of course, there is another dimension to this. Corporate permission needs to be granted for *intraprise*, not just formally but culturally. Intrapreneurs can and do drive change upwards into a corporate culture, but their task is made a great deal easier if there is a critical mass supporting change at the top.

Machiavelli said: "There is nothing so difficult as to institute a new order of things. And nothing so essential, nor so rewarding." We know from experience with many teams that you use the steps and perspectives in this article to drive away the six shadows that stifle success, and get ideas generated, shared, improved and put into practice. ■