Killing Mushrooms:

The Realpolitik of Terminating Innovation Projects\textsuperscript{12}

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Research and theory on innovation has paid a good of attention to how innovators effectively advocate their notions within organizations. Understanding that even the best ideas don’t sell themselves, successful “intraprenurers” must champion their proposals throughout every stage of the innovation process. An often unenunciated assumption in much of the work on corporate entrepreneurship is that every idea is a good idea—ones decision-makers should adopt. In truth, that is not always so. Some ideas are, simply, bad ideas and their continued exploration and adoption have negative consequences for firms both in terms of financial expenses and distraction from other, perhaps, more worthy innovation projects.

History is replete with examples of innovations, that, in hindsight, should have been terminated far earlier than they were. New Coke comes immediately to mind (although some have suggested the introduction, as flawed as it was, actually paid off for Coca-Cola, because of the huge public reaction). Consultants and employees alike sold United Airlines on an automatic baggage-handling system in the Denver Airport. After spending over a quarter of a billion dollars on the system, United decided, in 2005, that it was a lousy idea and switched back to a traditional system. In October of 2007 the drug giant Pfizer took Exubera, an inhaled diabetes medication off the market taking an almost $3 billion loss. People inside of Pfizer had successfully advocated for an idea that turned out to be a flop. In 1972, experts persuaded the state of Florida to dump literally a million used tires into the water off the coast. Goodyear even distributed pamphlets that said, “Worn out tires may be the best things that have happened to fishing since Izaak Walton (the author of “The Complete Angler”). Bad idea. Today, Florida is embarked on a massive cleanup because the tires are ruining natural reefs and destroying fish life.”

environmentalists in the Netherlands swooned when they discovered that palm oil from Southeast Asia might replace petroleum as a biofuel. They successfully advocated for government subsidies for companies which produced generators that burned only palm oil. But soon they discovered their idea was counterproductive: Building demand for palm oil devastated millions of acres of rain forests, destroyed rich soil through the overuse of chemical fertilizers, and released huge amounts of carbon emissions from draining and then burning peatlands.\(^4\) Had each of these ideas been stopped long before they were implemented, huge savings, financial and otherwise, would have been achieved. Perhaps even more importantly, other, more profitable ideas could have been pursued instead. The inability or unwillingness to terminate projects has enormous consequence on firms. For instance, in a survey of the software industry it was found that 46% of projects were completed behind schedule, over budget (with cost overruns averaging 150%) and with fewer functions than promised, and can be characterized as runaway projects. Of these projects only 25% are later judged as being successful. (Keil & Robey, 2001).

In this paper, we are interested in exploring how ideas are successfully stopped early on in their development. In virtually every conceptual model of corporate innovation, bad ideas are stopped as soon as their negatives are discovered. These models assume that through well-defined criteria, decision-makers will recognize the inadequacies of poor notions and reject them through systematic analyses using methods such as stage-gates and project milestones. In every project management class, there is a hoary maxim that bad ideas should be stopped early and hard. For the longer an idea is allowed to prosper, the more difficult it is to shut down.

The reality is, though, that despite the efforts of decision-makers, bad ideas often continue to be pursued within organizations long after they should have been stopped. In the words of one senior manager in an international energy firm, too often, “Bad ideas are like tough

mushrooms. You turn the lights off, and they grow; you shovel manure on them and they grow faster; you cut them off, and they resprout quickly.”

Why do bad ideas continue to prosper? There are a number of explanations in the research. First, as Royer (2003) suggests, bad ideas often stick around because of “a collective belief” that develops within the firm about the ideas. Leaders become deeply committed to innovative notions blinding them from seeing their faults and encouraging them to stifle dissent by others about the ideas. Over time, emotion-driven momentum within the firm to get products to market regardless of their merits pushes poor ideas forward. Secondly, bad ideas often fester because individuals are unwilling to risk the potential negative career consequences of admitting failure (Tegar, 1980), especially in competitive environments where others may get ahead when those individuals voluntarily pull the plug on their own ideas. Third, innovators, by their very nature, are often optimists seeing themselves as having more control over the future than they really do. Their self-confidence doesn’t let them admit failure. Fourth, there is a sort of “ownership mentality” about ideas whereby people who initiate projects are less likely to see problems in those projects and more unwilling to terminate them than others. (Schmidt & Calatone, 2002). Fifth, attributionally, people tend to assume internal causes for successes and external causes to failures. This bias encourages decision-makers to externalize bad news about projects. Sixth, is the propensity of people to escalate their commitment to ideas the longer they invest in them (Simonson & Staw, 1992). Especially when given ambiguous information, individuals tend to integrate irrelevant prior costs (e.g. sunk costs) into their current decision-making thus creating greater commitment to ideas regardless of negative feedback.

Given the negative consequences of not stopping bad idea, it isn’t surprising that researcher have also explored ways decision-makers can be encouraged to terminate ideas. Keil
and Robey (1999) summarized existing research findings identifying 12 different factors related to the de-escalation of projects. In a follow-up study, they discovered seven of these factors were seen, by information technology managers, as effective ways of de-escalating projects. They were (1) the degree to which there was an organizational tolerance for failure, (2) the presence of publicly stated resource limits, (3) the awareness of problems facing the project, (4) the clarity of criteria for success and failure, (5) the tendency of organizations to reward decision-makers for using good decision processes rather than simply rewarding outcomes, (6) regular evaluation of projects, and (7) the separation of responsibility for approving and evaluating projects. Keil and Robey don’t however, attend to the ways in which a termination decision is communicated. In project management, research on termination (e.g., Corbett, Neck, & DeTienne, 2007) suggest that many projects are ended via stage-gates systems, various metrics or established milestones for innovations, a focus on technical problems, market or opportunity assessment, discussion of alignment with organizational resources, structures, and strategy, and sometimes, just by letting notions drift into obscurity. Generally, project management models suggest that once a reasoned decision is made to terminate an idea, the idea will simply stop. Be that were it true. Royer (2003) argues poor ideas are stopped by people she labels as “exit champions.” To be successful, exit champions need hard conceptual and empirical evidence when arguing to stop an idea. They must get overly zealous project champions to agree to clear criteria for making a go-stop decision. Then, through collecting and communicating hard data on those criteria, must remove any ambiguity about the weaknesses of an idea thus overcoming the convictions of project champions. The consistency among all of these studies is a focus on objective data, clear criteria, and logical decision-making processes.
Yet, despite all of these different methods, bad ideas don’t always die. In many settings, corporate innovators persevere with their ideas even after failing stage-gates, receiving negative feedback, and even direct instructions to stop projects. In those cases, the challenge decision-makers face is overcoming the resistance of idea proponent. How they do this is the focus of this paper. We offer an exploratory analysis of the realpolitiks of termination decisions that have, to our knowledge, not been explicitly captured in prior research. Our first question is how decision-makers shut down ideas when tenacious innovators ignore the typical negative feedback mechanisms organizations offer (e.g., stage-gates) about their ideas?

In trying to terminate ideas, decision-makers face two challenges simultaneously. First, they must convince the innovator to stop his or her work on their idea. But, secondly, they must accomplish this task without destroying the commitment and motivation of the innovator to continue working on creative ideas. Telling someone that their idea—an idea they may have created and worked on for months or years—is not going to be supported runs the risk of alienating and de-motivating the proponent.

In understanding this dual challenge we conceptually draw from politeness theory. Politeness theory suggests that people have what Brown and Levinson (1987) call two core “face” needs. Positive face is the need to be positively evaluated, to maintain a positive self-image. Negative face is the need people have for autonomy, to not be imposed on. Brown and Levinson build explicitly on Goffman (1967) who sees face as an image located in the flow of events and as being supported by other people’s judgment. In this way face becomes a public (Mao, 1994), or for our purposes, organizational image. This interpretation of “face” fits well with Hu’s (1994) description of mien-tzu, which means something like prestige or reputation. When decision-makers discuss failing projects with innovators they must find ways of letting an
innovator maintain his or her face while, at the same time, convince him or her to terminate a project that may be of vital personal importance. How they go about this task is the second focus of this exploratory research.

The ways in which a rejection is communicated is important not only to the researcher or innovator being rejected but also to the manager or supervisor who does the rejecting. There are self-presentation issues at stake, as well as concerns for the rejected person’s emotional reactions, expectation for the future of the relationship (what Axelrod (1984) called “the shadow of the future), as well as issues of blame (Folkes, 1982).

**Methodology**

**Sampling and Data Collection**

For inductive theory-building research, theoretical sampling is appropriate, as opposed to the random sampling used in hypothesis testing and verification. As Eisenhardt (1989, p. 537) pointed out, when one is trying to build theory from case-study research, “random selection is neither necessary, nor even preferable.” The organizations studied in this research effort were not selected at random but rather carefully chosen based on their “fit” with the particular aspects of organizational attributes pertinent to this study.

We sought informants who were in key positions to talk about innovation in the energy industry. At the end of the interview we asked if they knew key people in their organization or in others that they would recommend we talk to, thus generating a snowball sample (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Johnson, 1990). When choosing informants in this manner, we are not randomly sampling from the universe of potential informants. Rather we are selectively sampling the specialized knowledge of the topic that these informants possess (Johnson, 1990).
Each interview lasted 40–60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. To facilitate our subsequent data analysis, we translated the Norwegian interviews into English and checked everything for semantic and contextual accuracy. Then, for our analysis, we printed the Norwegian interviews with Norwegian and English translations side-by-side.

The in-depth interviews were loosely structured. By loosely structured, we mean more structured than unstructured, lest a completely unstructured interview format would “yield only a few banalities” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 17). Because this research involved multiple sites and multiple interviewers, it was especially important to employ a similar format for the interviews, developing a common framework and maintaining cross-case comparability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The structure of our interview guide also permitted us to exploit any opportunities that presented themselves — a method that is flexible and that favors adaptation to each context and individual (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Our interview guide contained a handful of topics that provided a baseline for adapting the interview to the unique opportunities that presented themselves in each interview.

In each interview, the interviewer would introduce an area of interest and provide the transition to the next topic when appropriate. “Once respondents have been brought within the sight of the topic, they must be allowed to ‘go’ wherever they wish” (McCracken, 1988, p. 40). By letting informants talk themselves “warm” about a topic that engaged them, we gained many new and valuable insights. We also used probing and follow-up questions extensively. “The interviewer must be able to take full advantage of the contingency of the interview and pursue any opportunity that may present itself” (McCracken, 1988, p. 25). We maximized the yield from my interviews by taking full advantage of this “opportunistic” approach to interviewing.

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5 This is particularly true when dealing with informants as engaged, knowledgeable and articulate as the subjects of this study.
Coding of Data

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe a stepwise approach that includes open coding (in which the categories are discovered and developed), axial coding (where the categories are arranged in a conceptual structure) and selective coding (which includes the final integration of concepts, refinement and validation of theory). Being an exploratory study with the purpose of discovering categories of communicative behavior across two countries, we focused on the front end of this stepwise process. That is, we identified unique incidents (of “items” that would stop a project) that were sufficiently dissimilar to other incidents, in order to generate a list of unique communicative behaviors. Researchers should interact with and discuss our data while coding (Charmaz, 2000). “Coding helps us to gain a new perspective on our material, …and may lead us in unforeseen directions” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 515). We spent time collectively coding and discussing our data.

Since our study is exploratory and our data limited in scope we focused on discovering as many unique types of behavior, not on tallying or counting the frequency of these behaviors in each category or in each country. Having generated a list of communicative behaviors we sifted through this list to weed out potential duplicates. This was our first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009) of the data. Here we found two main dimensions: termination moves and accommodation moves with multiple subcategories for each. Our second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009) or axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the data involved sifting through the interviews to collect as many examples as possible of termination moves and of accommodation moves. We then collectively went through and identified the most illustrative cases for each category. These were then organized in a large table, which were then used for subsequent resorting of incidents, and
collapsing of categories. While doing this second cycle or axial coding we refined our subcategories along the two main dimensions.

As a final step we went through and looked at which things go together and are similar to each other and which do not (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tufte, 1990). We then identified seven super categories.

*Direct.*

The direct technique is a simple no with little or no explanation. A Norwegian senior manager offers that: “Clearly… it is very simple….we just say politely no, and then we say that we’re not interested in this, or good luck and such.” A U.S. executive offers a similar approach: “I just say - Hey, it's not going to fit with us right now.” While another U.S. energy executive recalls how, in the past, he’s been told to end a project:

“I think at one point, it finally goes – Enough. Done. That’s been done to me.

I’ve been told that after kind of pushing things. They finally say – Don’t ever bring this up. We’re done. We’re done. We don’t want that idea.”

There seems to be a general agreement among both Norwegian and US managers that this is usually, not just a poor way to do it, the consensus is that it is the worst way to do it. There are several potential reasons for this. One is that is has negative face consequences for both parties. The manager who consistently rebuffs petitioners with a direct “no” without giving any reason will quickly lose his or her “positive face” (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987) in the organization and the stream of ideas across this managers desk will soon dry up. It also has adverse effects on the advocate’s positive face as well as negative face. If a researcher has his or her ideas repeatedly rejected like this their reputation (positive face) will suffer, and this in turn will soon impact their freedom to act (negative face).
Criteria-Based

Criteria-based termination statements are ones that communicate to innovators that their ideas fail to match criteria the organization uses when judging new ideas. Sometimes, these criteria are formal—stage-gates, metrics, and so on. Criteria-based terminations represent what one typically finds in project management models. In one case, a Norwegian managers suggested that in his firm:

*We have an independent evaluation we approach a larger decision, we call it an arena, who then performs a systematic QC that is an independent quality check of the product, someone who sees it from the outside.*

Sometimes, though, the criteria may be more idiosyncratic—technical or financial criteria used by the decision-maker that the innovator may or may not have known were going to be applied to his or her idea. For instance, a U.S. manager relates what he does:

*S\ sometimes you kind of create reasons that are obvious that it doesn't need to be done. The market changed and it doesn't fit anymore. There's a new technology that's come out that's better. It's costing too much. If enough of those are brought to the surface, then it kind of becomes obvious [that the idea needs to be terminated].*

Similarly, a Norwegian executive talked about various kinds criteria for risk evaluation associated with a project: environmental and public relations—*...both the direct environmental exposure we have by entering the rain forest, but also the media exposure attached to it. Is that something we want to enter? No it isn't...* but also technical, physical, financial risks associated with various projects.

Another Norwegian manager:
And then we need to consider what the competing alternatives are, what is the market, what are the chances of success, what is the genuine in it. What is the required capital to move forward, how mature is the idea, is it a flying idea, is it partially along the way

Among the specific criteria used when trying to convince innovators to terminate their ideas were: (a) poor timing, (b) lack of customer demand, (c) budget constraints, and (d) the need to implement and go to market.

In explaining timing, one manager said, “An idea must be timed, and it could very well be that the timing was poor a year ago and that it is very good one year later.” Customer demand is critical and decision-makers will encourage an innovator to often end their pursuit of idea on the basis of no demand by customers. For example one Norwegian Manager said: “[W]e were unable to sell it to the customers, … after a while there are no customers, … then budgets are cut...[and the idea is terminated]. In fact, using the lack of customer demand for the innovation was viewed by some managers as a good way of killing ideas. It took the blame away from them and placed it on the customer. One U.S. executive related a time: “I think it was easier on the guys then because it was [the customer—a major energy company] Exxon that killed it. It wasn’t internally (us). People were PO’d at [customer] and not [us].

Budget issues were commonly used as a way to stop an idea. One U.S. executive said it simply: “We told [C] we weren’t going to pursue it and he kept working on it anyway. So then we took away his budget.” And a Norwegian manager related a time when he told an innovator he would have to find funding elsewhere: "The formal way is to say that we have no faith in this. You have to approach someone else” An American executive does the same thing: “So, one way of killing it is simply saying – We don’t have the money for it anymore.” Another way to do this is
to use a ranking system tied to what the firm could afford. A Norwegian manager stated: “When the budget constraints get approved, we compare [each idea] to the shortlist and see how far down we get. The ones that go through get a GO and the others don’t.”

One of the major challenges executives related is the tendency of some idea proponents to have ideas that will take too long to come to fruition:

*If we’re talking about a new technology prototype development concept that’s going to take years to develop and the company has a need to bring this prospect in within, instead of 10 years, 2 or 3 years, then that ought to eliminate it.*

Sometimes, innovators aren’t willing stop the development their projects and implement them, believing more needs to be done. So companies have to:

*[F]reeze the concept on the basis of the premises that were there then. He [the researcher] did not have this view. For him it was about continual improvement and such. So he was in the progress of becoming a pain. And there were a lot of people that were pissed at him quite simply. So he is the kind of guy who could go in during an early stage and develop and bring forth the good ideas, but would be a disaster in the implementation. Because then it is about doing what you have agreed upon.* (Norwegian innovation executive)

This illustrates one of the many challenges managers and executives face in curbing their researchers and innovators enthusiasm for their projects, and it aptly illustrates the level of commitment many of them have. Terminating innovation projects is an important task and when done well it can be immensely productive.
One very effective way that emerged in the data for terminating ideas were peers reviews. In some cases, these reviews are public and use peer pressure on the innovator to stop his or her work. One American executive described his organization’s process: “A lot of the dynamics that we have in the groups that I’ve worked in has been - we have design reviews - meetings where you've got to present what you're designing. We call them Stump the Chump.” Most often, the reviews are supposedly done by presumably independent colleagues or managers. For instance, in a large geo-physics firm, the process of terminating by criteria is described as: “We have what's called a peer review. My boss, the chief geophysicist, the chief geologist and the chief petrophysicist of the company, sit in the neutral capacity in the company. They form a peer review team.”

Using peer reviews has several potentially beneficial effects. By involving innovator’s peers, innovators know whom they have to get their ideas past, and might prepare better to meet and counter objections they know are coming, but it also takes the pressure off management. Furthermore, it involves many experts with diverse backgrounds and experiences in the decision process.

*Alternative*

*Different project, same issue*

Ideas are sometimes terminated by managers suggesting alternatives that might do as well as the proposed idea or by modifying the proposed idea so much that the initial idea effectively disappears. For example, managers reported suggesting to idea proponents that other projects have addressed the same issue. One Norwegian manager often used external experts to evaluate proposals and often, from those experts: “[W]e get either “yes, this is good,” or “no, this is out in left field.” Or very typically – “this, we’ve seen before.” No one can keep track of everything
that is developed and in development. Having someone say that this is not new, or we’ve seen this before, is a very effective way to halt an innovation effort.

**Modifying until acceptable**

Other managers indicated they would shut an idea down by modifying the proponent’s suggestion in ways that make it viable. And, sometimes, the change leads the idea to be the responsibility of another person rather than the original advocate. For instance an American executive said: “You may take an idea and shift it enough to where it’s different. It’s got some of the parts of that, but it’s been changed [so that it is adoptable].”

Ideas are often half-baked when they are first presented. By involving others and tinkering with it, and changing it and modifying the idea until you have something, is a good way to not only terminate half-baked ideas, but also to start projects that have the potential of becoming useful. Furthermore, modifying reduces ownership because it is typically other people than the originator who do the modifying. The American executive continued: “So another person is really taking ownership of it.” This is more easily done with a modified idea, because it is no longer entirely the originator’s. This can also be a useful way to avoid irrational escalation of commitment.

**Personalizing**

A fourth cluster of techniques falls under the rubric of personalizing. In these cases, managers attempt to discourage or end ideas by focusing on how the idea (or the termination of the idea will have personal consequence. Personalizing includes moves such as: Demeaning, Not-My-Idea, Self-Interest, and Punishment.

One method was by highlighting how a proposed idea failed to match the interests of the manager or the organization in terms of origination. For example, one U.S. manager related that
in the past he has heard executives say things like: “It’s maybe a good idea, but it’s not my idea, so let’s kill it.” Another U.S. manager described a time when he got too far ahead of his immediate manager:

“I think I had it [my idea] too well thought out to where – I actually had some graphics put together and had already had some talks with some of the managers of these facilities. I think I’d gone too far down the road. So it was kind of my idea, and not my boss’s idea [and it got rejected]. I’ve learned that a few times.”

Managers can also be very selfish about ideas. If they don’t see anything in it for them, they may kill them. Consider what one proponent inferred from a conversation with a manager a few years ago: “It maybe good for the enterprise, but it doesn’t look that good for me, so we should kill it because it’s going to affect me personally.”

Sometimes executives will terminate ideas by simply punishing the proponent. This seems to arise especially with the very tenacious advocate. One U.S. manager admitted:

_I think someone’s just enamored with a particular idea … to the place where this is a repeated behavior that’s not helpful or aligned with our core values of respecting people and honesty and integrity. That, then, starts to have real performance consequences for an individual._

Even worse, sometimes the way the idea is terminated is by demeaning the proponent—embarrassing them publicly, a US Manager admitted: “There are some classics out there, like totally demeaning somebody’s idea in front of everybody. I’ve seen quite a bit of that at times.”

Another US manager continued:
“Or say something belittling, which isn’t ignoring it, but belittling it and basically almost laugh that idea off and shun that person for bringing back the same idea….If you want to kill the idea, you make fun of the idea itself and the person who brought it to you.”

Personalizing—punishing, not-my-idea, self-interest, and demeaning—might well be an effective way to kill innovation projects. But it is also likely to have some adverse face effects.

Politics

Every organization is a political entity and ultimately there is always a politics of ideas. In examining responses of the interviewees we noted a number of what we labeled political moves—overloading, assigning to a different project, removing talent, changing leadership, passing up—made by managers when attempting to terminate ideas.

Overloading or assigning to a different project

Some managers suggested that ideas were stopped in their firms by simply overloading idea proponents with other responsibilities. A U.S. manager says:

If I have a guy that’s been championing something and we don’t go along with it, sooner or later, I just give him so much other work that he has to focus on that. Sometimes that takes a lot of micromanagement and forcing him or her to focus on the new job, or the new project.

A Norwegian engineering executive suggested the same:

It is a bit indirect…that now we can’t work with this anymore. Now we are going to work on this instead…I think that to get people to work with other stuff, to draw their attention towards other things, to bring the attention to
something new…one continually talks about, that is tries to guide the
conversation towards new challenges, and creates an interest in that [instead].

Another U.S. manager:

“[Describing a past project] They [the proponents] were so hot and heavy
working on it, think they’re going the right way, and all of the sudden they get
yanked off and put on something else. Generally when we do pull those
individuals off, we try to go and give them something else that’ll take their
mind off of what they’ve been doing for the past 2 years, try to give them
something that basically matched or – I guess in the grand scheme of thing –
the glory of that project.”

Overloading or assigning to different project seems to be a not uncommon move both
in the US and in Norway. It is a political way to kill projects, since managers use their
chain of command authority to steer people away from certain projects and ideas and
over towards others. This can potentially be done gradually and carefully or more
abrupt and explicitly.

Removing talent

In some cases, rather than reassigning the proponent, managers described times when
projects were terminated by removing talent—taking vital people off a project they wanted to
end. For instance:

We’ve had several projects in the past where typically what happens is once
we realize that the project is bad or it’s going down the wrong path, we
typically don’t just kill it right then and there. We kind of let it fizzle out and
put less people on it, is what happens.
Related to this is when a key person that has been championing the project leaves or is reassigned.

*Change in leadership*

Sometimes, the politics of project termination requires a change in leadership. A manager might feel a new project has little potential but believes that someone senior to him or her is sponsoring that project. So the manager kills it only after the senior person departs. A US manager put it aptly: “*When the leadership changed—relative to the senior level—sometimes an idea would die at that point because everyone down below knew the idea wasn’t going to fly that well.*”

This only illustrates the potential importance of innovation project champions (Pinchot, 1985).

*Passing up*

Finally, a political strategy that came up with some of the interviewees was passing the project responsibility on to a boss who would let the project simply die. One U.S. geophysics managers relates:

*Pass it on. I'll just - if I don't have the guts as somebody's immediate supervisor, to be professional about it, the thing I would do is - I'll just pass it on to the next - We need to have a meeting with my boss to see what he thinks.*

Another US manager suggests:

*[I might say] I think that’s a great idea. I’d love it to fly, but I’ve talked to the boss and he doesn’t like it. Or – this looks great – but I’m really thinking it doesn’t – I’ll take it upstairs and see what the guys say and see what they come*
back with. That’s where the slow no often comes in. Yeah, they just haven’t
got back to me yet. And really it’s just people putting you off.

Passing responsibility for terminating a project to someone higher-up—
whether true or not—is one strategy for saving face.

Externalizing

By spinning-out

Another cluster of strategies for terminating innovations is by externalizing—suggesting or mandating the idea be given away or sold to another organization. Here is one Norwegian executive:

“[I would say] Do you wish to push this forward, then you are welcome to do that, but you must do it outside our company. Maybe we can give you something. Maybe we can invest together…And if the employee says …No, I’m not that interested, then he has in a way been heard, received a professional treatment, and then he’s back at research and new ideas. Then I don’t think that the new ideas will pop back up again…. He can quit the company and go out and realize it, or they can even sell the idea to others or give it away or whatever they want.”

An American manager echoes this method:

“we did that with a product in Houston… We took a product to California…All it was, was to get it over there, build out what we had orders on and kill it.”

When externalizing by spinning-out, organizations are effectively terminating any internal pursuit of the idea, while giving the proponents an opportunity to pursue the idea outside of the organization. Such a move by the organization can potentially have important positive
effects on researchers and innovators, which remain in the organization, freedom to act (negative face).

*Kill by independent evaluation*

Another way of externalizing, is to give the responsibility for termination of a innovation project to an independent or external evaluation. One Norwegian manager tells us: “We have an independent evaluation we approach a larger decision, we call it an arena, who then performance a systematic QC that is an independent quality check of the product, someone who sees it from the outside.” One of the reasons this is done is an attempt to avoid adverse face effects within the organization.

*Passive*

A seventh cluster of termination techniques were far more passive. Sometimes, executives would let a project die simply by ignoring it, by delaying, or by not helping. For example, one American executive said bluntly, “… you kind of ignore it every time it’s brought up for discussion. It’s ignored.” A Norwegian manager, in his interview, suggested something close to ignoring—keeping a communicative distance from the proponent:

Manager:  “No really, clearly we don’t have meetings with people we don’t believe in. Then it is email contact which uses limited resources.”

Interviewer: “Do you try to avoid oral contact with those you want to keep at a little distance?”

Manager: “Yes, with the ones you want to keep at a distance, yes.”

Rather than ignoring, other managers indicated one way to terminate projects is delay and postpone so long that they become irrelevant. One U.S. manager said, “You slow the idea down as opposed to kill it.” Another US manager related: “Just keep pushing it out, pushing it aside.
There’s some testing that needs to be done with it and other priorities keep getting put in front of it, so it just kind of goes on and one and on.”

Sometimes the passive response by managers is not helping the proponent remove blocks within the organization that hinder his or her attempts to develop the idea. Here is what one US manager reported happening with one project:

“The block there is where my boss theoretically would then make every effort to get the drilling department in alignment. If he [the boss] wants to let it die without having to wear the black hat, he doesn’t remove the block.”

Hassling the Proponent

A final cluster of termination tactics incorporate interviewees descriptions of how sometimes innovations are stopped by hassling the proponents about implementation or interdependencies that would affect the innovation. For instance, one U.S. manager said that “sometimes you talk about implementation--what a pain it would be.”

A number of interviewees suggested that a common method was to highlight the challenges the innovation would face because of interdependencies between that innovation and others projects, company issues, and so on. For example, a Norwegian engineering leader related:

“It can be a project that we have where the idea is great, but in order to realize it we are dependent on very advanced camera technologies where you cannot, there is no such camera today.”

Of course executives and managers might not just employ just one single kill strategy, but multiple strategies in conjunction. It is entirely possible to combine passive strategies—
ignore, delay, and not helping—with criteria strategies (e.g. there is no demand), and personalizing strategies—(e.g. making fun of the idea and/or its proponent).

To illustrate the various termination moves we’ve created the clustering diagram in Figure 1 below. As the clustering diagram shows, there sometimes is overlap between the categories (Hodson, 1991). This clustering map shows the relations between these concepts (Carley, 1994). Figure 1 is an endogenous map, not an exogenous one, in that it shows the relations among the concepts themselves and not in relation to some exogenous dimension (that is, there is no X-axis or Y-axis in this figure).
Successfully terminating an idea can help firms avoid squandering money on bad ideas as well as allowing the organization to refocus funds and talent on more profitable projects.
Escalation

Arne (11) “There are lots of internal ideas there. So to bring forth internal ideas there it is to declare that one wants ideas, that one has an open door, that one is positive when people come with ideas. Cause the worst thing you can do is to be negative if someone comes with an idea. Then you can be certain that this person will not come back with another idea afterwards.

Arne (12) To try to motivate to new things even if you, to put it that way, fell flat on the 60 meter dash, then that doesn’t mean that you should not run the 60 meter dash again.

Bakken (14) of course, have faith in it and personal ownership to it and as you say they get a stop order for it that can seem negative and demotivating.

Mark (8) When you look at the overall company, I’m not saying this is an example of a bad idea, because it may suit some places, but if you have sort of – if we accept that something is a bad idea and someone continues to push it, what it really means is – to me – that there’s a manpower is being siphoned off to work on things that don’t make a lot of sense of the company. And overall, if you have that type of thing going on in a big way, it really hurts your company. You’ll go out of business ultimately if you have people work

People often know it is a bad project but decision-makers won’t kill it and thus those people become demotivated
We might also tie this escalation or failure to terminate a project in a timely manner to Biyalogorsky, Boulding and Staelin’s (2006) finding that managers who escalated a losing course of action (commitment to a product failure) did so due to “improper use of initial positive beliefs in the face of negative new information.

Accommodation Moves

The second approach we found taken by our respondents to stop project ideas, was one we have called “accommodating moves”. A central aspect to many of the accommodation moves were that the idea proponent him-/herself was the one to make the termination move rather than the proponent’s manager. Characteristic of all accommodation moves was a concern towards gaining acceptance for the decision to terminate a project idea, or to maintain the idea proponent’s motivation when his/her idea is terminated. A Norwegian executive stated it clearly: “…the worst thing you can do is to be negative if someone comes with an idea. Then you can be certain that this person will not come back with another idea afterwards.”

Accommodating moves are as a way to build acceptance for termination prior to making the termination move, or as a way to regain the idea proponents’ motivation or to alleviate the “grief process” after the termination move was made. As another Norwegian executive stated: “That was an idea, and clearly people were fired up about it, but there wasn’t any potential in it. …so it was shut down completely. Then clearly those people go into a little grief process, that is natural.”

Our analysis of the interviews yielded 17 different methods that our respondents used to as accommodating moves. The 17 methods can be organized into five clusters: (1)
Organizational moves, (2) Establishing a link to decision criteria, (3) Managerial attitude, (4) People politics, and (5) Enabling Externalization.

Organizational Moves

Making idea development and termination a team effort.

This category included moves in which the companies would organize their innovation efforts, even in the early phase, as team efforts rather than individual efforts. This ensured that ideas were developed in cooperation between colleagues, so that the sense of ownership of the idea was shared. Or in the words of one Norwegian executive: “Our projects usually don’t have one very clear originator of the idea. “ This sense of collective ownership of ideas and projects was a recurring theme in our interviews.

“And then I send off some others who are told to...think completely new. They are gone, not long, half a day, and then they come back and present everything in a plenary session. And then we have a couple of hours with (discussions) where everyone are allowed to criticize each other and come with ideas and very little is controlled. And then we have to focus it and put out a long list and a short list of topics that we feel that, or the group collectively feel that we should work with.[emphasis added]“ (Norwegian energy company executive).

Another effect of having teams developing ideas was that these teams would often make the termination decisions themselves, not their manager or some committee or board. As to Norwegian executives noted. “It is never like someone or other sits and says that I decide that this is how it shall be. It never is.....Because everyone has to own... feel that they own and are part of creating the process. “ He elaborated: “.....they’re nearly the ones that have come to that
conclusion, that there’s no point in continuing this. ... And then it’s them coming to the conclusion that this isn’t working.“

The general approach here is that if the team collectively generates the idea, then emotional commitment to the idea is lower than if it is one individual’s pet project, this lessens the risk for irrational escalation of commitment (Biyalogorsky, Boulding & Staelin, 2006). Furthermore, it enhances the ability of these teams to terminate unworthy projects themselves.

*Mix staff with different levels of experience*

This category contained accommodation moves in which companies would create development teams, deliberately mixing experienced staff with less experienced. This held benefits for both the experienced and novice, as one Norwegian manager pointed out:

*Sitting around a table with experienced and inexperienced people, it is important to mix those ... Because experienced people have inhibitions. “We’ve never done it like that, and it is probably not possible to do it in any other way then I’ve done for the past 30 years.” On the other hand, experienced people also know what is actually impossible, but young wise heads that are not “destroyed” by experience, they go for it. “*

He continued:

*It’s definitely been a success. Also this thing about experience – you see that the young ones implement the older and more experienced in their problems. So it’s worked fantastically well......If they have ideas or suggestions, they’re very quick to get in touch with those who have experience and discuss the problem.*
Mixing the newly graduated with seasoned experts is a good way to do knowledge transfer. The newly minted get to draw on the experience of others, and those with decades of experience get exposed to new theories, approaches and ideas.

Allow limited testing

In this category, we saw that companies would organize means to allow an idea to be tested out to a limited degree, i.e. allow some limited time and funding to be allocated to testing out an idea before making a decision whether to terminate. This might be organized formally as illustrated by a Norwegian manager:

“…. one gets put aside…20% maybe, of the budgets as “discretionary funds,” so if you have a crazy idea you can come to your boss and get an OK – thank you, it doesn’t fit with our strategy but sounds exciting, so you get 2 months to keep at it, make a small team and do a small pre-project on it, because…we don’t have to ask anyone about it.

It might also be an informal arrangement as practiced by this US manager: “But as long as it didn’t take so much of the focus and so much of the resources away, then you might let them run with it and learn from it.”

By doing such testing the company would limit its commitment to one project phase at the time, and maintain right to terminate the project later:

“[O]nce we’ve started projects then they’re defined for phase 1, which means that we agree to run it in phase 1, and then we’ll reconsider what to do in phase 2. So we very rarely commit to a long run.”(Norwegian executive)

The benefit of this approach is that the idea proponent might come to the conclusion him/herself to terminate the project idea:
“... the best is if the inventor who comes with the idea actually says himself that...yes, but dang it, that looked like a good idea, but it wasn’t really. That is, then we’ve taken that person seriously, we’ve given him opportunities to develop his idea, and we have come to a conclusion where even he sees that it is not a good idea”. (Norwegian executive)

Limited testing limits not only the organization’s or managers commitment and exposure to risk, but it also ensures that potentially viable ideas are explored.

Organize as formal project

A final type of move in this category was to organize even early efforts as formal projects, since by doing so, well-understood and accepted rules-of-the game were evident:

“So when we treat ideas and have come to the point where this is something we are going to take further, then we’re very strict about defining it as a project. And by doing that the whole follow-up structure follows. Because we’ve seen that we haven’t been good enough at that earlier – we’ve let ideas just roll on and on.”(Norwegian manager)

The implication of this formal establishment of projects is that those ideas that do not get to become projects are terminated.

Establish a Clear Link to Decision Criteria

One of the most common categories terminating moves was the one that included “Criteria-based” termination. That is, projects would be terminated if they did not meet typical Stage-Gate criteria; such as business potential, technological feasibility, alignment with company strategy and so on. It was however a common understanding across our informants that idea proponents would accept termination of their idea if it was clear to them how it did not meet such
criteria. A number of moves were thus taken by the companies to run the idea selection and
development process in such a way that a clear link to the business criteria was established.
Moves in this category typically involved the blending of R&D with managers, staff from
business functions and customers. One Norwegian company with a separate R&D department
used a rule of consistently identifying the functional line management that would eventually be
the user of the idea and involve them in the decision process:

So we’re very aware of that now, in that if we’re going to run innovation
projects or R&D projects, then the line management has to be involved. They
have to commit resources and they have to be willing to pay half of the cost.
And that works as a pretty good calibration on how good that idea actually is.

A similar reasoning is illustrated by this US manager:

I think the most effective way is generally if there is somebody in management
that can kind of champion the product. Sometimes you kind of create reasons
that are obvious that it doesn’t need to be done. The market changed and it
doesn’t fit anymore. There’s a new technology that’s come out that’s better.
It’s costing too much. If enough of those are brought to the surface, then it
kind of becomes obvious. You generally have the one person who originated it
or championed it that never want to let go, but at some point, they just say –
We’re going to kill it.

One Norwegian company ran formal sessions in which the development engineers would meet
with the company’s managers and its customers to get a common understanding of customer
needs and business success criteria:
One has processes through the year that takes care of that. It always starts with the customer; by having [a technology session] with the customer, where the customers to a large extent comes and tell us about their needs and why, what they need and so forth, and try to match that with our products and our strategies.

And he continues:

Here it is teamwork and it is cross-functional teams and it is teams across...between researcher and business unit. And it is, that is people understand in a different way that one does research so that the company can make money, not because it is fun to do research.

Here the proposed benefit is that researchers get a better idea of business issues and that business managers get a better idea of technical issues, and gain a better understanding of how one hinges upon the other.

Similar moves were found to establish a link to technical criteria. As one Norwegian R&D manager said:

"In all the cases I’ve seen, there’s been a technical discussion, which has led us to approaching it from a slightly different angle, but let them more or less keep the idea behind it. Because often the basic idea might be pretty good, but the approach to it might not be optimal."

Another way to establish a link to specific criteria, is to give specific goals to researcher. This was employed to assess R&D staff’s performance against company business goals and reward them according to how well they contributed, thus motivating them to pursue company goals rather than their own goals. As a Norwegian manager explained: “You get recognition by
delivering on the targets you have agreed with your boss about. If you then are doing completely
different things that he doesn’t know about, then you can’t deliver what you’ve committed to. “
And he continued: “It’s that balance, because researchers can keep going forever. So it is even
more important that researchers have a set of goals and are measured on that than perhaps
anyone else. “
Managerial Response

Managerial response reflects the attitude shown by managers in response to ideas being
advocated. Two sub-categories were identified: Showing openness and showing respect. Our
informants’ beliefs were that by showing openness towards their ideas and respect for them as
experts, one would stand a better chance that idea proponents would be prepared to accept
terminating moves or rejection of ideas.

Openness

Openness included findings where informants emphasized the need to demonstrate an
open-door policy and an attitude to be willing to listen to new ideas. Also, by being open to
explore an idea a manager would gather information that would help clarify whether it met key
business criteria. A manager in a US energy company said that it was important for him to come
across as “listening to them, that I want to give them a fair hearing.” And that in doing this he
built his credibility with them. He also felt that he owed them “not to have my mind made up
until I’ve seen enough of it to be able to make this kind of objective decision.” He wanted to
communicate objectivity and that he took them and their ideas seriously.

What I try to do, as much as I can, bring objectivity into the conversation. ...
most of the time, when you demonstrate to people that you’re giving them a fair
hearing, that you’re being objective with them and that your mind is not made up to begin with, that you’re actually listening to them.

A statement from another US manager also illustrate this attitude of openness.

We told him there. Said – Look, everything that you come up with is not necessarily going to work. But you need to continue to come up with those things because there’s going to be that one thing there that’s really going to take off. ... That’s really actually worked out for us really well. Now he’s just cranking stuff out left and right. I think he’s getting a better sense now of what will work and what won’t as well. I think just being supportive – that’s the main thing.

Norwegian managers expressed the same attitude. One Norwegian manager in a similar position to the US manager above said:

So to bring forth internal ideas there it is to declare that one wants ideas, that one has an open door, that one is positive when people come with ideas. Cause the worst thing you can do is to be negative if someone comes with an idea. Then you can be certain that this person will not come back with another idea afterwards.

So openness to new ideas is communicated through a willingness to listen. Closely tied to this is to show an attitude of respect.

Respect

This category captures what several of our informants stated, namely that a great deal of accommodating comes from largely treating people decently. Terms such as “respect”, “taking seriously” were used consistently. In the words of one US manager:
“If we respect the other person, we say – There’s a reason why they’re saying what they’re saying. ... So I think that the inquiry, the ability to ask a colleague what makes them think that this is the right way to go? And to pursue that down in more depth so there are more reasons why you think it’s not the right way to go and you share those in a productive way.”

This accords with the statements of a Norwegian manager: “Everything has to be taken seriously, even if you feel that this cannot possibly be very smart. But you have to take it seriously.” The statement of another Norwegian manager also supports this sentiment: “The only thing we are very concerned with is that everyone gets ... as good feedback as possible. We will help you even though we think the idea is strange ... we shall be both polite and respectful.”

The focus in these statements is twofold. One and perhaps most importantly to these managers is that they communicate to the people working with and for them, that they take them seriously and that they are open to their idea. This is important since a failure to do so might just restrict or otherwise limit the flow of new ideas that come across their desks. The second, and related issue, is that they actually take all these people and their ideas seriously, for the next one might just be the big one.

People Politics

Educating

This category includes moves that serve to educate the idea proponents, and bring them to a level of understanding where they see and accept why their idea may need to be terminated.

The manager might already know that the idea is bad and should be stopped, and by involving the proponent in the exploration of the idea he would enable the proponent to see the shortcomings of the idea and accept the termination move. In the words of two US managers:
“The questions I try to ask are not so much – I want to ask that one killing question. It’s more of a dialogue where I’m trying to get people to think through the questions that are important as you progress or mature a prospect. Those are questions they should be asking every time they generate another prospect or go into an area, etc. There’s – you’re there for a purpose. The mission of the company, the impact that you can add by being an individual or by being a member of the team – you have to look at your client.”

“I think trying to take more a coaching stance about – okay, help me understand your thought process on this idea and where do you see this added value, why do you think the timing’s right – and almost trying to walk them through one of those framing type discussions. And teach them the skills to think – Hey, I actually canceled this idea myself because I can see it doesn’t fit with this - rather than – Boy, I did all that work and that guy just canceled it. Do you see what I mean?”

We also found instances where our informants had a deliberate strategy of teaching idea proponents—by many other means than just questioning—about the need to match business criteria, and how an innovation process has to be managed. The purpose was to build understanding and acceptance among the idea proponents for why ideas often have to be terminated. A Norwegian manager illustrates the point:

“Yes. It’s really that we educate, we create agents in the organization, and they’re supposed to be a little like Gyro Gearloose and who are also listened to locally in their line organization. Who both promote their own ideas and help others come up with ideas. And they get educated to understand what an innovation process is. Also that part of stopping ideas, so that’s a form of
learning too, to be prepared that an innovation project actually can be cut off at any time, in a totally different way than ordinary projects. And that works for that group.”

In the same vein, from a US manager:

“ The strategy, I think, is just a really – (1) make them see the value in the decision that was being made – why it was killed. I think that’s very important. To go in there and say – Ah, they don’t know. Upper management doesn’t know what the hell they’re doing. This is BS, bologna or whatever. You’ve got to spell it out for them. Make them understand. So if it does happen again in the future, they have a better understanding of why. But make them understand that it had nothing to do with them.”

Move to another meaningful task

A category of terminating move we found was that of killing an idea by moving its proponent on to another task. Moving people to another task can however also serve as an accommodating move if it is done as a means of maintaining motivation. It is necessary though, that the new assignment is perceived as meaningful and interesting by the idea proponent. The quotes from these managers may serve as illustrations:

“ Generally when we do pull those individuals off, we try to go and give them something else that’ll take their mind off of what they’ve been doing for the past 2 years, try to give them something that basically matched or – I guess in the grand scheme of thing – the glory of that project, let’s try to find something a little more glorious for them to work on so it doesn’t ruin their drive. “ US
“….it’s just like pulling a rug out from underneath your feet. Here they are, they’re all working hard. They’ve got a product they’re so proud of. Then the next day, it’s over with. The main thing I did was just try to keep morale up. We need to make these people feel – this kind of thing is going to happen, we really value what you do. That’s why we’re going to move you over on this really cool thing.” US

“…there is a little bit of child rearing in that. That it is better, instead of hitting the child because they spend time on it, it is more like drawing their attention towards something else. “ N

Enable Externalizing

Another category of terminating moves we found was ”Externalizing”. However, externalizing can also be an accommodating move. The company can allow the idea proponent to get external funding and pursue the idea internally, as demonstrated by this Norwegian manager:

“ So in some cases where a proponent has really wanted to push his idea he would continue hunting for money externally……because if they get external funding then it’s just good for us. It increases revenue.”

Also, seeing that the idea can be used elsewhere, either outside the company or in other projects inside the company, can serve as a motivation and increase the proponents acceptance of a termination move:

“.. so we chose the other solution for the project, but it is clear that when the work was continued. But there are other places where we can use the same technology even if [project A] didn’t need that solution, then it could be used in other areas. But it came back to [project A] anyway. So the idea sought other opportunities to make it work.” N
“...and you often have a few spinoffs, learning under ways on stuff like this, so you take with you the good elements of it, and...There is a lot...even though the main idea isn’t viable, then there can be a lot of spinoffs that are very good to bring with you, elements.”

**Figure 2. Clustering of accommodation moves**

**Towards a model of innovation project termination**

Here we need to connect and integrate termination and accommodation moves.

**Discussion**

Bad ideas are very costly for firms. They suck up time, eat up money, create unnecessary dramas, and often preclude organizations from work on other, potentially more valuable projects.
While research has clearly identified many of the ways idea champions successfully market their notions, relatively little academic study has been made about how bad ideas are successfully terminated. And, the work that has been done takes a strong cognitive and rational perspective (e.g., stage-gate models). In this project we conducted an exploratory investigation of the realpolitiks of idea termination. We interviewed a number of managers both in Norway and the United States (all in energy related businesses) seeking their descriptions of the ways ideas are killed within their organizations.

The vast majority of interviewees initially offered the traditional explanations for idea termination. Certain criteria (e.g., financial) are established to evaluate ideas and when projects fail to meet those criteria, the interviewees report that idea champions are told to desist. But as we continued our discussions with these executives, many began to bring up less logical, often more personal ways, ideas are sometimes stopped in their organizations. After carefully listening to these discussions we identified seven non-criteria-based methods. The first was a simple and direct “no” with little or no explanation. The second method focused on decision-makers highlighting alternatives to champions—we already have a project underway that addresses your idea; we will keep some of your idea but we’ll modify it to a point that the original idea is lost. The third method was far more negative—personalizing the rejection by punishing, even humiliating the proponents, referencing the fact that the decision-maker gets to choose ideas, pointing out the idea will hurt, in some way, the decision-maker and thus it will be killed. The fourth cluster of methods focused on political sorts of moves. Decision-makers would reassign the proponent to another task thus making it impossible for him or her to continue their pursuit, overload the proponent with responsibilities, remove necessary talent, passing the idea on to a person who will clearly not follow-through, and wait for a change in the status of idea sponsors.
The fifth method was to externalize the idea—sell it, or spin it out, to another organization. The sixth category incorporated more passive moves such as just ignoring the idea, delaying or postponing it, and, in some cases, killing ideas by not removing the obstacles that would aid the innovator in creating their idea. The final method was to create so many hassles for the champion that the idea falters. Decision-makers do this by focusing too much on implementation early on and by hassling the innovator about all the necessary interdependencies that need to dealt with.

Let’s be clear, the managers we talked with were not recommending many of these methods in most cases. Most managers found many of these methods distasteful. Nonetheless they recognized them having been done. The sample we used for this project were all engineers in the energy industry. If one were to imagine any professional group that would highlight rational and empirical methods, this would be this group. The fact that we were able to elicit some less rationale methods is impressive. We would suspect that if we had chosen a different industry—say consumer products or the media, the real-politiks methods we observed would be much stronger. Future research should explore this.

Interviewers were also very focused on how termination messages can be communicated in ways that, while stopping an individual from working on a project, don’t discourage him or her from being innovative in the future. As we alluded in the introduction to this paper, decision-makers must juggle two simultaneous challenges when shutting ideas down—killing the notion and keeping the spirits of the innovator up.

In a second part of this study we sought to understand how managers deal with the latter challenge—what we labeled accommodation moves. Here we discovered five primary methods. In many cases, they fit nicely with the seven termination methods. Indeed, many managers would tell us how a message could be delivered both well and poorly. The first, as we discovered
with the terminating moves, was the use of criteria. If the criteria is clear and well communicated, innovators will understand why their projects are being stopped. The second cluster of accommodating moves focused on how decision-makers addressed innovators when giving them the bad news. They suggested the best accommodative messages were marked by respect and openness followed by a spirit of inquiry and education. Thus, the third method of using political moves emphasized empathy when, for instance, an innovator is moved on to another project. Find, said one decision-maker, another project that will intrigue the innovator as much as the first one. Fourth, when externalizing an idea as a way of killing it, offer the innovator participation and support in the externalization. Finally, many of the interviewees suggested various organizational moves that accommodated the desires of the idea proponents while nonetheless ending the original project. For instance, let the proponent be one of the people who test the idea, make it a team activity.

In our interviews it was quite apparent that there was a universally expressed desire to take seriously all who came with ideas. Taking seriously took many forms that are expressed in these accommodation moves. Taking people seriously, even when rejecting their ideas and innovations, is an attempt to save face, both for the rejector and he rejectee. Without going into the finer details of the Chinese concept of face we note that for the rejector the face element might be most closely tied to the Chinese concept of lien (Hu, 1944). A lack of lien suggests a moral flaw or defect of character. A manager who consistently rebuffs those who approach him or her with new ideas might lose face in that employees will find this a defect in them. Whereas managers who take people seriously and listens to their ideas will find his or her lien intact even though rejecting the ideas of the persons approaching. Employees and researchers approaching

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6 The Chinese concept of face is what Goffman (1967) built his discussion of interaction rituals and “face” on, and it is Goffman’s concepts that undergirds Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) notion of face.
with innovative ideas on the other hand stand to lose their face, or *mien-tsu* (Hu, 1944), that is their reputation and prestige.

One major challenge we still face is determining how actually effectiveness of the various moves. Obviously, it would be unlikely that managers would bring them up if they were never successful. Future research will need to determine how frequently each of these techniques are used, how effective they are in actually ending projects, and the relevancy of each of these techniques to different sorts of ideas. It may well be that in engineering projects, criteria-based techniques are especially effective while in administratively-oriented projects, other techniques are more effective. There may also be major cultural differences in people’s preference for the various techniques. Cultures vary on dimensions such as how direct people are in the way the approach issues. There may also be different preferences (uses) in different sorts of organizations. For example, one large energy firm is known to publicly celebrate the vital importance of consensus in reaching decisions. In that firm, ideas may be terminated in very different fashions than in firms where executives are more direct, and less democratic, about decisions. We have plans to explore these sorts of issues more quantitatively in the future through systematic surveys of decision-makers who have experience in terminating ideas.

Obviously, one concern for managers interested is how they can actually determine whether an innovative idea should be stopped. As more than one manager related, you know there are a lot of bad ideas floating around, but which ones specifically are bad is very difficult to determine. History is replete with examples of tenacious innovators who overcome massive resistance and in the, proved themselves right about their ideas. We recognize the assumption we have made in this paper that decision-makers are accurate in assessing the value of ideas prior to the termination decision.
References


