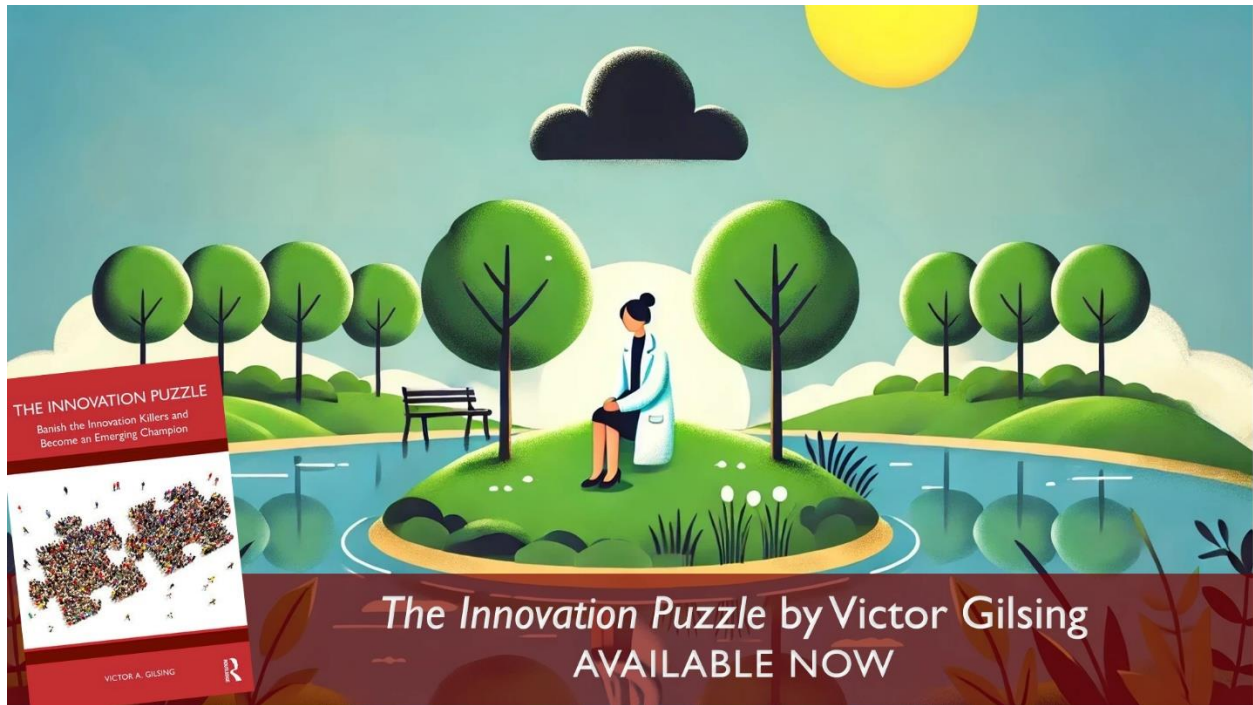




Knowledge you wise in some ways, but a blindfolded fool in others

“I am always happy when lots of good scientists tell me something is not a good idea—because when I hear this, I know it has the potential for a breakthrough”

Severin Schwan, CEO and Chairman of the Roche Group

The Hidden Danger of Cognitive Entrenchment

Experts are invaluable—and I assure you I’m not just saying that because I’ve been known to bill myself as one! Among other things, they help companies avoid costly mistakes, refine execution, and navigate complexity. But expertise also carries a hidden risk: **cognitive entrenchment**.

You see, the deeper someone’s knowledge, the harder it can become for them to recognize and embrace ideas that challenge what they know. This tendency can create a real drag on innovation, becoming one of the most powerful “innovation killers” I identify in my new book, *The Innovation Puzzle*.

When Expertise Becomes a Blind Spot

Cognitive entrenchment is the tendency of subject matter experts to evaluate novel ideas through the lens of existing mental models. In *The Innovation Puzzle*, I describe how this bias is especially prevalent in successful organizations where current expertise has led to market dominance.

The dynamic works like this. The more experienced someone is in a given domain—and here I’m talking about expertise accrued through managerial experience just as much as technical expertise obtained from formal training—the more likely they are to reject anything that doesn’t align with that domain’s logic. These experts think within their deep pockets of knowledge and judge novel ideas exclusively from the perspective of their established domains of expertise and experience.

What to Watch For

To identify cognitive entrenchment in your organization, look for these warning signs:

- Experts saying, “*That’s not how we do things here*” or “*I like the idea, but...*”
- Repeated rejection of ideas that lack immediate feasibility
- Feedback loops that reward refining the known instead of exploring the unknown
- Subject experts dominating evaluation processes for new ideas

Breaking through Entrenchment

In *The Innovation Puzzle*, I suggest several measures you can take to counteract cognitive entrenchment:

- Bring in outsiders or naive experts to introduce fresh perspectives during ideation and evaluation
- Build mixed teams of insiders and outsiders for idea evaluation to balance domain knowledge with fresh thinking
- Create structural separation between innovation teams and core business operations
- Heavy disagreement and rejection by experts signals that you may about to have a breakthrough. Cherish the rejection and see it as a signal that can foreshadow future success!

Final Thought

The next breakthrough might sound unrealistic or even foolish—especially to your smartest people. But if everyone agrees too quickly, you’re probably not innovating. Sometimes, it takes an open mind to recognize the future. Especially when it doesn’t look like the past.