



Why Innovation Champions Burn Out, and How to Prevent It

I've spent years of my academic life studying innovators and examining how they operate within organizations. One of the key things I've noticed down the years—and one I talk about in depth in my upcoming book [*The Innovation Puzzle*](#)—is that companies often shift the responsibility for innovation onto individual employees, when they should see innovation as an organizational capability.

Let me give you a clear example of this. Many companies appoint “innovation champions,” who are tasked with pushing new ideas forward. You might be what’s wrong with this approach. Doesn’t it indicate the firm is serious about bringing innovations to market?

All too often, no, it doesn’t. Because most innovation champions spend more time **fighting for innovation**—or, to put it another way, **fighting against** the myriad anti-innovation forces in their organization—than they actually do on **working on innovation**.

They battle outdated processes, risk-averse leadership, and internal politics—all while carrying the expectation that they will single-handedly drive the company’s future growth. It’s a recipe for burnout. And when these individuals burn out, so too do the firm’s hopes of innovating.

The Hidden Costs of Innovation Burnout

When burnout strikes people tasked with leading innovation, companies don’t just lose talented people. No, they send a negative message to the entire organization: **innovation is a losing battle**. And what happens then? Future champions hesitate to step up. Risk-taking declines.

At best, the company will fall into **the low-hanging fruit trap**—pursuing only small, obvious innovation opportunities that don’t challenge the status quo. The true game-changers never make it past the first round of discussions.

What Organizations Should Do Instead

To prevent burnout and make innovation a sustainable capability, companies must rethink how they support their innovation leaders. In *The Innovation Puzzle*, I propose a range of solutions. Here are two of them:

- **Distribute, don’t isolate:** Innovation should not be the job of one person or team. It should be embedded across the organization.
- **Fix the system, not the symptoms:** To that end, companies must change the structures and incentives that discourage risk-taking. In some of my recent posts, I’ve talked about different ways they can do this

If your company has burned out its innovation champions, the problem isn’t the champions. From the outset, they were enlisted into a battle that they could never win.

The big question is this: What will you do to make sure your company works with your next innovation champions, not against them?

Interested in learning more: attend the global launch event 23rd June in Amsterdam for my new book “The Innovation Puzzle”: [“The Innovation Puzzle” Workshop and World-wide Book Launch - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#)