

If innovation at your company requires “champions” and heroics, something’s broken. In this post drawing on insights from my new book *The Innovation Puzzle*, I explore why organizations need to stop romanticizing innovation in this way and focus instead on removing the adversity that stands in innovators’ way. Organizations don’t need more innovation “champions.” They need fewer barriers.

Illustration



Main article:

Organizations Like to Treat Innovation as a Heroic Act. Here’s Why They Shouldn’t

As far as we know, human beings are the only creatures on Earth that tell stories. And wow, do we like to tell them! Whether truth or fiction, what usually makes our stories compelling is that they involve a protagonist who has to conquer adversity.

Tales of this kind have no doubt fulfilled various psychological and practical needs down the millennia. Now, I don’t want to step outside my lane of innovation research, but within that domain, at least, I have to wonder whether our love of the adversity story is a wholly healthy thing.

You see, I've noticed that stories about innovation successes—including, crucially, those told by organizations—tend to be framed as tales of heroism: a bold, lone individual who pushed a brilliant idea through despite resistance, bureaucracy, censorship, or disbelief.

Yes, today's inventors are inspired by these tales about their predecessors. But these stories are also troubling. Because there is absolutely no reason why innovation has to be a battle against adversity. Yet organizations seem to buy into the idea that it does.

Or at the very least, that seems to be what they think, if you look at how poorly set up for innovation many of their internal systems are.

What a System that Creates Adversity against Innovation Looks Like

One of the key premises of my new book, *The Innovation Puzzle*, is that many organizations fail at innovating because they are structurally and culturally optimized for the core business. Their systems are designed to reward predictability, reduce variance, and drive efficiency. Why is this bad for innovation? Because these systems usually:

- Penalize risk-taking.
- Prioritize short-term financial performance.
- Filter out ideas because they don't measure up against conventional metrics and mindsets.
- Entrench the power of middle managers focused on execution.

Also in *The Innovation Puzzle*, I explain that these traits give rise to what I call **innovation killers**. Here are some of the most egregious of these:

- **Sunk Cost Bias:** Over-investment in existing systems and reluctance to abandon them.
- **Bias Against Creativity:** Preference for familiar, measurable ideas over bold or uncertain ones.
- **Complacency and Hubris:** Overconfidence in past success, leading to underinvestment in future potential.

The Hidden Cost of Heroic Innovation

When innovation only succeeds through extraordinary effort, the message is clear: innovation is not the norm, it's the exception.

The long-term effects?

- Burnout among the—usually quite junior—people given the innovation remit.
- A perception among people who could be talented innovation managers that focus on innovation would be a career dead-end.
- Hesitation from future innovators to step forward.

And worst of all, organizations come to believe their systems don't need to change—because innovation is still “happening.”

Changing the System, Not the Innovator

Innovation shouldn't require heroics. It should be supported by structures, incentives, and leadership behaviors that enable exploration, protect experimentation, and reward learning.

That means rethinking:

- **Strategy:** Is innovation at the heart of your growth plans, or a sideshow?
- **Structure:** Does your organization have pathways for new ideas to survive early friction?

- **Leadership:** Do senior leaders role model and reinforce innovation behaviors?
- **Culture:** Is curiosity punished, or is it prized?

Final Thought

If your company frames its innovators as heroes (hint: describing them as “champions” implies that it is), pause to ask: Does the adversity they face really need to exist?

Real progress comes when your system helps people bring new ideas to life, not when it makes them fight for it every step of the way.