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## 4 Strategies For Winning Over Innovation Naysayers

**Soren Kaplan, the author of Leapfrogging, provides four questions to ask when faced with those putting a drag on innovation.**

By Soren Kaplan

Have you ever come across someone who exhibits “wet blanket” behavior? We recognize it when we experience it. Simple words extinguish ideas, zap energy, and gobble up enthusiasm:

- *We don't have time to innovate.*
- *We're not set up for innovation.*
- *Innovation isn't rewarded.*
- *We can't do anything until we have more data.*

These statements are often symptoms of a corporate culture rooted in the status quo.

Some of the most successful companies around simplify the innovation equation by focusing on outcomes rather than the process itself. Their leaders shape the mindsets and behaviors needed to achieve big things that have a big impact—and in the process, eradicate wet blankets along the way.

Take Gatorade's president, Sarah Robb O'Hagan, for example. Having learned that many young football players pack bananas in their sport bags only to find them mashed between their cleats before practice, she asked her product development team to create a better solution. The result: Gatorade “01 Prime,” a pre-workout drink pouch with a powerful carbohydrate punch.

Gatorade launched the pouch with lightning speed, hoping to make a big splash in the market by establishing a new product category. But while the pouches had tested well in a lab setting, some of them leaked when sitting on store shelves—a considerable problem for a product meant to be a cleaner alternative to mushy snacks like bananas. In many organizations, customer complaints and internal grumblings would have stopped the entire program in its tracks. Rather than running for cover and placing blame, O’Hagan focused on managing the fallout personally to turn the problem into a company lesson.

O’Hagan helped her team “reframe failure” by using the experience to emphasize the importance of trial and error. “We could have waited another six months to ‘get it right,’ but we would have missed both the summer season and a great learning opportunity. In fact, the leaky pouches caused everyone to revisit their assumptions about the packaging, which led to an even better ergonomic design and superior packaging materials.” The pre-workout drink pouch, along with several other products, ultimately became the foundation upon which Gatorade reinvented and re-energized its entire G Series product line and brand.

Even if you’re not the CEO, the next time you hear a wet blanket tossed into the mix, throw it back. Ask the individual or group:

1. *What’s the smallest step we can still take to have the biggest impact, in spite of the identified barrier?*
2. *What’s an example of a previously successful innovation that spread and grew despite the wet-blanket barrier? What success factors could be applied again?*
3. *What have we learned from previous attempts (failed or otherwise) that we can apply this time around?*
4. *What can we proactively do now without permission—and then ask forgiveness for later?*

Wet blankets give anyone the opportunity to become a leader—by highlighting them, challenging them, and taking action to sidestep the real or perceived barriers they pose to leapfrogging to your next big thing. Of course the best way to hang wet blankets out to dry is to make them irrelevant in the first place—not by spending time pontificating on the innovation process itself but rather by taking bold actions to role-model real innovation that leapfrogs the market and the competition.



## Author

Soren Kaplan is the author of two bestselling and award-winning books, *Leapfrogging* and *The Invisible Advantage*. He is a former corporate executive, an affiliated professor at USC’s Center for Effective Organizations, and founder of InnovationPoint. Based in San Francisco, he delivers keynote speeches, leadership development, and consulting on business strategy and innovation throughout the world.

