

Ideaicide

How To Avoid It And Get What You Want

By Alan Parr & Karen Ansbaugh



Death of an Idea in One Act

SCENE: Chairs swing side to side; eyes fall on the presentation materials. Alan watches the faces around the table. Everyone tries to be invisible. Eye contact ceases. Alan thinks his pitch to save the failing project was great. His boss looks at her boss, the project sponsor. The words finally come, slowly at first: “we’ll take your idea under advisement.” Then faster and faster: “...not part of the original plan—we can’t do that...not our business model—we can’t do that...not cost effective—we cannot do that.” Chairs swing side to side; heads nod smugly. Everyone knows the idea is dead, dead, DEAD.

This scene is played out in companies big and small around the world. We call this phenomenon “Ideaicide.” Ideaicide muzzles innovation and ruins companies, yet it is in your power to do something about it. Ideaicide is your problem.

Every great company starts out small, churning out ideas and looking for a breakthrough. When they stumble on to an innovation, they milk it for all it is worth. Company structure, policies and culture are then set in stone to support the original success. *In today's business world, a company's most important asset is still its ability to continually come up with new ideas.* So how do you advance great ideas and personal vision through corporate cultures, politics and organizational alignments that are inclined to resist them? How do you avoid Ideaicide and get what you want at work?

We will look at when and how to pitch ideas, and to whom they should be pitched. Using the movie industry as a background, with its long history with the pitching process, we will divide the steps to success into two distinct areas: the audience (people) and your storyline (content). To avoid Ideaicide, you must get an audience to believe in your idea and to see the possibilities in your story. So let's start with your audience, and understand the dynamics of the people around you.

The Audience

Captain, Road Prison 36: What we got here is... failure to communicate.

COOL HAND LUKE (1967)

In any large corporation, innovators that put forward new ideas have the deck stacked against them. Most companies are laced with people who are very quick to say “no.” Let’s go back to our one act play. It doesn’t matter what the idea was, the “pitch” to present it did not capture the imaginations nor overcome the conventional wisdom of the audience. The use of the term conventional is not derogatory—just descriptive. We are all conventional about something; in this mindset we need context and a reason to act: “What does this have to do with me?” and “What’s in it for me?”

Get to know your audience before you put together your pitch. This means understanding the corporate culture you’re in, the people you deal with in general, and lastly who holds the power in your organization.

CORPORATE CULTURE

Michael: Fredo, you’re my older brother, and I love you. But don’t ever take sides with anyone against the Family again. Ever.

THE GODFATHER, (1972)

Corporate culture is the air of conformity that fills a workplace. New employees on arrival are indoctrinated into the culture. *“This is our history. This is our philosophy. This is who we are, and this is who you are.”* For most companies, there is the corporate-brand culture (those things that the company aspires to in the public eye), and the local culture of a division or business group within the organization.

In your quest to advance your idea you should know that (a) tying your idea to the corporate-brand culture is okay (you're essentially taking the moral high ground), but (b) if you haven't addressed the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of your local culture, you probably won't get very far. You will find yourself alone and exposed on the moral high ground, an easy target for the locals. So find those corporate goals that you believe in and can support with your idea, and get to know the locals.

Alan describes his failure to take into account the locals –

“At the time, some software had been released prematurely. It had many problems, and we were losing customer accounts. But as a problem solver, I looked on this as an opportunity to shine; I was on fire, constantly giving suggestions. I was trying to make things great, but I was also creating negative perceptions with some people who thought I was a loose cannon. Unawares, I was beginning to make some enemies.”

SCREEN TEST:

Know your scene. What are the stated business goals? What are the unstated business goals? These are some of the motivations you have to understand and weave into your pitch. Understand the corporate and local cultures into which you are pitching your ideas.

PEOPLE

Forrest Gump: Mama always said life was like a box a chocolates, never know what you're gonna get.

FORREST GUMP (1994)

People want to help people they like. It's that simple. Being respectful, gracious and a good listener does make a difference. Informally chatting and asking "what do you think about..." questions at lunch, walking to and from meetings or while waiting for the coffee to brew in the break room will pay-off when you pitch your idea. These traits coupled with a sense of humor will take you and your ideas far. Keep in mind the following:

1. People need to be able to answer the questions: "What does this have to do with me?" and "What's in it for me?"
2. People need to be convinced that a new idea is worthwhile.
3. People need to be heard.
4. People need time to absorb new ideas.
5. People need to perceive you as trustworthy.

Karen has found "cold calling" helpful. When she is tasked with coming up with a solution idea, she will call or email relevant people and ask their opinion or gather some basic information about their area. By doing this one on one, she establishes a rapport with people who may be critical to supporting her idea; she gets a feel for what is important to them and becomes more knowledgeable about relevant issues. If you ask for a wide range of views, especially from those beyond your usual circles, you increase your potential to see what you can't see.

When you use cold calling in the process of formulating your pitch, you build trust with your soon-to-be audience. Your pitch will be somewhat familiar to them and tailored to answer those two most important questions people need answered. People who don't know you start to perceive you as someone who pays attention, possibly an authority on the particular subject, and when they hear some of their issues addressed in your pitch, they are more open to your ideas. The more connections you make with people and the environment, the more pathways to the future you create.

SCREEN TEST:

Start chatting with people about what *they* think. You will be able to incorporate your findings into your pitch or, at the very least, know where the issues lie. Conversations can be informal or scheduled based on individual preference (theirs not yours), and they should be relatively brief, no more than 30 minutes and usually under 10. Ask open-ended questions. Take notes.

People want to help people they like.
It's that simple.

POWER

Merovingian: "Choice is an illusion created between those with power and those without."

THE MATRIX RELOADED (2003)

Having a corporate leader bless an idea early on (or appear to have blessed it), usually causes all other concerns to vanish. Market research, cost benefits and focus groups' results can all be magically overcome. Managers who are *intrapreneurs* provide the best form of sponsorship to a new idea. These intrapreneurs create products, make decisions and take risks. They are willing to put some faith in the unknown, and to provide a supportive environment for bringing ideas to life.

The question to be answered in your corporate scene is—who has the power? Do you need to *sell up*, *sell down* or *sell sideways*? (Note: we don't believe in selling out.)

Selling up is the standard and ultimately compromising task of convincing everyone above you, hierarchically, that your idea is worth pursuing. Selling up works well when your immediate superior(s) is strong, well respected within the organization, has a good track record of bringing new ideas to life, and can set the stage when presenting your idea to the rest of the hierarchy and smooth out any initial criticism. Selling up is tough, and clearly a team-game.

Selling down, on the other hand, is much simpler. It is the process of obtaining approval from the most powerful person first. Selling down works well in relatively small organizations, where it is easier to obtain access to the people at the top. Understanding the personalities involved in the approval process can help you to control the situation. Selling down, of course, can have undesired effects too, as John Lasseter of Pixar and Disney fame, found early on in his career:

"When it came time to show the idea, I remember the head of the studio had only one question: how much is this going to cost? We said about the same as a regular animated feature."

*He replied, 'I'm only interested in computer animation if it saves money or saves time.'
We found out later that others had poked holes in my idea before I had even pitched it.*

In our enthusiasm, we had gone around some of my direct superiors, and I didn't realize how much of an enemy I had made of one of them. I mean, the studio head had made up his mind before we walked in. We could have shown him anything and he would have said the same thing.

Ten minutes after the studio head left the room I got a call from the superior who didn't like me, and he said, 'Well since it's not going to be made, your project at Disney is now complete. Your position is terminated, and your employment with Disney is now at an end.' So, yeah, I was fired."

Selling sideways is how most of us have to sell ideas in a corporation. It includes selling up, selling down and selling to first degree interested parties (meaning those who will be most affected by your idea). It's the "it takes a village" approach to getting an idea heard. The trick is to obtain support while not diluting your idea by incorporating everyone's suggestions (unless they are worthy). But do listen carefully as it will help you formulate your pitch.

SCREEN TEST:

1. Find out who the go-to people are. Which names come up when successful projects are mentioned? These are the people who get things done and they can mentor you and your pitch.
2. Sell up. Sound out your boss to see what reaction to expect if you go to someone else with an idea. At best, get your boss on board by showing how your idea will benefit her—reflected glory is a good thing.

Storyline

Charlie Croker: Hang on, lads; I've got a great idea.

THE ITALIAN JOB (1969)

Experience in the real world shows that Ralph Waldo Emerson was wrong when he said, “*Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door.*” A vast number of innovations succeed simply because they are sold better, not because they are better than the competition (VHS v. Beta, Blu-Ray v. HD-DVD). No matter how wonderful something is, it will only be accepted if the right people can be persuaded of its value (consider the Beatles and EMI). Selling is all about the story.

In this section we will guide you through the process of taking your idea and developing a story around it—your pitch—that will help you smooth the way to acceptance.

People need something familiar to relate to in order to gain a sense of comfort with the new, the strange.

RELATABILITY

Ideas are usually rejected out of turn for being too “something”—too fast, too unproven, too far beyond the corporate image. “Too something” is a reactionary description used to take the edge off ideas that are strong, bold, and a little scary at first sight. Your challenge is to help people discover a means, harmonious with the culture, to accept your concept.

People need something familiar to relate to in order to gain a sense of comfort with the new, the strange. Creative ideas take the facts, feelings and everyday fictions we all share and find new ways to connect them. By making the new and strange seem familiar, you not only establish an opening for your audience to interpret your idea, you create a backdrop against which the edge of your idea will shine. Alan has had great success pitching ideas at a financial services company using a manufacturing metaphor.

“One of our clients buys financial products, repackages them and sells them in the market. I used supply chain management as an analogy to demonstrate how new ideas on product acquisition, forecasting and management would benefit the company. Without the manufacturing metaphor, these ideas would have been coming out of left field.”

Karen finds using metaphors that are truly ordinary, but relatable to most people, helps her audiences put themselves in the “scene.”

“Our client’s organization was being merged with another arm of the organization. We had built some quick and dirty manual processes to accommodate CEO-requested functionality between the merging entities. We knew there would be additional requests before the merger placed everyone on the same systems—so we proposed interim solutions to relieve the stress and risk of the manual processes. The operations managers were having trouble understanding why we’d spend the time and money. Using the analogy of building small bridges between ‘towns,’ instead

of using row boats (quick and dirty manual processes) until the superhighway went in, helped people understand the need and value of interim solutions.”

SCREEN TEST:

Find a way to make your concept approachable and memorable with a riveting story.

- Take a tried and true idea and show how it benefits from the addition of your concept or
- Take your concept and embed it in a metaphor, preferably one that rings true for your audience

PROPS

Morpheus: This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill— you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.

THE MATRIX (1999)

How you present an idea is of paramount importance to its success. More often than not, if you don't use the right words and images, you won't set the foundation for the rest of the conversation to follow. You need to present your idea through concrete images, associations and stories that are within people's comfort zones. A little “wow” factor helps, too.

In describing something new, something beyond most people's vision, you need to create a mental map for them to follow you and your idea to its successful conclusion. The art of making a mental map is to hook your audience with what they know and then explain what they don't know. Start with a construct that everyone is familiar with and add to it.

So how do you create a construct for something that people have never come across before? Make up a new word. The title of this manifesto, “Ideacide,” is a fine example. It cuts through the clutter and gives everyone a new word that they can agree on. If we called it “Innovation,” we would probably find that a lot of people have their own notions of what innovation means.

Another trick is to literally draw them a picture (or map). We have used a brief form of storyboarding with our clients. Instead of PowerPoint slides with bullets, we illustrate the concepts with pictures in two or three slides. Think about Alan’s supply chain metaphor—he illustrated that using the client’s financial vocabulary to label it. Karen’s storyboard had three panels: (1) isolated “towns” separated by a river, (2) narrow bridges connecting the “towns” until (3) the superhighway connects everyone. She also used the client’s terminology to label the panels.

Helping people to create mental maps and shortcuts through clever word use allows everyone to be on the same page when you get to the heart of your idea. Illustrated metaphors help people grasp and retain your idea. A little razzle-dazzle makes them pay attention. When you buy something, doesn’t the packaging play a role in piquing your interest?

SCREEN TEST:

1. What is left on the cutting room floor in movie production is at least as important as what is shown to the audience. Without great editing, even the best storylines can be blurry, disjointed and lack a punch. Go over your materials. Make sure everything directly supports your idea. If you have promised them a comedy, deliver comedy, not a tragedy with a few weak laughs.
2. Your props must convey your idea. If they need to be sophisticated, make sure they are. If you want input from your audience, make them more open-ended, less polished to show you are open to suggestions. Note: “less polished” is not sloppy or thrown together.

3. THE PITCH

*Jerry Maguire: I will not rest until I have you holding a Coke, wearing your own shoe, playing a Sega game *featuring you*, while singing your own song in a new commercial, *starring you*, broadcast during the Superbowl, in a game that you are winning, and I will not *sleep* until that happens. I'll give you fifteen minutes to call me back.*

JERRY MAGUIRE (1996)

Ideas rarely sell themselves. People need to be convinced that a new idea is worthwhile. As filmmaker Oliver Stone put it: “I think that magic is perhaps the most important part of the pitch. And in a sense... it’s a seduction, a promise of what lies ahead. At a certain point the writer needs to pull back and let the producer project himself as the creator of the story... project what he needs to onto your idea that makes the story whole for him.” Stone’s point is crucial: once someone becomes excited enough to add their own creative touches, it means that they are seeing the possibilities. They believe in your idea. If you can make someone feel creative, they will likely view you as someone with imaginative ideas. They will want more.

Clearly, in making your pitch there is a need to “please” your audience and gain their acceptance. However, there can also be an organizational pressure to fit the mold and succumb to the corporate party line. We actually recommend that you begin by moving in the opposite direction—don’t try to please right off the bat. When you’re pitching, begin by describing the current situation. Talk about what’s broken, and list the issues that the organization faces. This may seem illogical, but in all great storylines, the author *creates a problem*, and then *solves a problem*. Do this respectfully—focus on the results that are not happening, acknowledge roadblocks that may be impeding progress, and do not point fingers. If you did your cold-calling screen test, you framed the issues as a problem solver, not a loose cannon. Your opponents won’t hesitate to launch into a tirade about the imaginary problems your idea may cause if you haven’t established mutual recognition of their issues.

Also, being the uber-professional isn't always important, and it can backfire if one is stiff, boring, or coming across as "just a suit." Such pitchers are seen as insincere, passionless, and lacking imagination. Conversely, naïveté and quirkiness can convince others that a pitcher has fresh ideas as long as there is substance to their pitch. Finally, never pitch a laundry list of ideas. A Hollywood producer once said, *"There's not a buyer in the world you can convince that you have the same passion for five different projects. What you're selling is your passion. You're rarely selling your idea. You are selling you. You're selling your commitment, your point of view."*

SCREEN TEST:

1. Review your materials and spiel with someone you trust—think of it as a dress rehearsal. Ideally, you have found an innovation mentor who knows the ropes at your company and can give you solid feedback. Otherwise, find someone you trust who can be objective and brutally honest. Pay attention to the reasoning behind their comments—you may need to reorder what you say, or edit more before you pitch.
2. While a cast of thousands worked well for Cecil B. DeMille, the "wisdom of crowds" never happens in pitch meetings. Again, if you've done your "who has the power" screen test, you have a fairly good idea of who you should pitch to first. You may not have control over the list of invitees, but you can frame your request for a meeting with language such as "I wanted to run it by you and (fill in the blank) first to see if it makes sense."

REWRITES HAPPEN

Harry Burns: Had my dream again where I'm making love, and the Olympic judges are watching. I'd nailed the compulsories, so this is it, the finals. I got a 9.8 from the Canadians, a perfect 10 from the Americans, and my mother, disguised as an East German judge, gave me a 5.6. Must have been the dismount.

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY... (1989)

Sometimes even with a great idea, a solid story and a great pitch, things can go awry. Timing or events beyond your control will get in your way and you'll find yourself looking at rejection. Be prepared for resistance. You may be so far ahead of the curve that people don't yet understand what you're saying. After all, if you're working on a truly original idea, there is no way on earth to prove ahead of time that it's going to work!

First things first—don't give up! Rejection happens to everyone at some point in their career. If you're not being rejected, you're not trying hard enough. Secondly, evaluate what happened with your pitch. The critics aren't always right, but your gut feeling usually is. Be objective. Could something be improved? Is your idea (or are you) simply not a fit for the organization? Keep thinking, keep communicating; keep trying. Over time, the validity of your idea will resonate with those who are willing to listen. And, if someone doesn't "get it," just move on. It takes courage to resist the gravitational pull of corporate entropy, but it is the best thing for you if you wish to remain an original thinker.

If you're working on a truly original idea, there is no way on earth to prove ahead of time that it's going to work!

To close the opening scene, Alan describes why things went wrong:

“Looking back I can see the errors that I made. The group I was presenting to was sensitive, even defensive... My idea could’ve been taken as criticism of their earlier decisions. I was selling up without a team, without a champion. I had created negative perceptions that I wasn’t a cultural fit. My idea was not conventional. My pitch was technical, and I disengaged the catchers who weren’t technical even though they worked in IT. I oversimplified the issues, leading the audience to believe that my idea was excessive and a waste of money.”

So what happened to our intrepid idea pitcher Alan? As you recall, his idea was not accepted. The company lost large accounts because the software project did not perform as advertised. There were lay-offs, and when the dust settled, Alan’s idea was successfully implemented. Alan was long gone, however, having chosen to get out and start his own business. He is happily (and successfully) selling his ideas up, down *and* sideways.

If you have reached this point, you are ready to step outside the confines of the corporate box and open yourself and your ideas to others. This takes courage.

Congratulations and successful pitching! 🎉



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alan Parr and Karen Ansbaugh are cofounders of the [OpenSky Consortium](#). They approach consulting with creativity, elegant execution, and wicked senses of humor. Each, having gone through several career iterations, finds a “management-design-development-consultancy group” a perfect match for their respective skills and so do their clients.

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