

## Killer Phrases

### Keeping a pro-stagnation attitude

*"We've tried that before."*

*"Put it in writing."*

*"That won't include everyone."*

Or, my favorite: *"Get a committee to look at it."*

Every group has its own set of "killer phrases," phrases that can shoot new ideas before they ever get a chance. Killer phrases can keep a group from trying new ideas and can keep innovative voices from the margin from making an impact on the mainstream. What are killer phrases and how can groups minimise their hurtful impact on a group?

Killer phrases prevent creativity by creating a culture of shooting down new ideas. Innovator Chic Thompson writes:

Killer phrases have been around since the dawn of time. They are uttered by seers, pundits, pessimists, naysayers, doomsayers, leaders, bosses, husbands, wives, siblings, coaches, writers, teachers... indeed, by everyone, including you. They've become part of our culture... Consider ex-President Grover Cleveland's astute observation in 1905:

*'Sensible and responsible women do not want the right to vote.'*

Harry Warner, President of Warner Brothers, said in 1927:

*'Who the hell wants to hear actors talk!'*

## Decca Records pronounced, when it turned down the Beatles in 1962:

*'Groups with guitars are on their way out.'*

Killer phrases are common in our culture. They are part of the culture of negativity that surrounds us. Growing up, children are bombarded by negative statements: "Don't do that. Be quiet. Don't play with that." One study found parents making 18 negative statements for every positive one. In school the ratio was also high: 12 to 1.

We can view this as part of an oppressive system keeping down people's creativity. When people stay creative and questioning, they are more likely to question oppressive authority structures and offer alternatives to the current system.

So we can support creativity in our own groups, by allowing new ideas to flourish and reducing killer phrases. Of course, we need to recognise that not all creative ideas are necessarily *good* ideas (many just will not work out).

One value "killer phrases" can play, is to raise serious questions. For example, the Killer Phrase "We don't have the resources" might be reframed as a question: *How do we mobilise the resources to do this?* Instead of shutting down the idea, though, the question offers a useful challenge – not the ending of the idea. This is key, when confronted with

a killer phrase it is important to inquire to see if there is an underlying question or fear that needs to be addressed.

## **How can we minimise Killer Phrases? Some ideas:**

### **Institutionalise the term Killer Phrases**

Have a brainstorm of Killer Phrases used in your group (encourage lots of laughter as people recognise them!). Naming the phrases will help your group recognise them as they are used in subsequent meetings – encourage people to notice when they are using them. Help each other minimise the use of them (one group throws paper wads when people use killer phrases).

### **Create a culture that values lots of ideas**

Groups that have *too many* ideas are more successful than those that have *too few* ideas. Otpor, the group that was responsible for the overthrow of the dictator Milosevic, had lists filled with hundreds of different tactics they might use. Most of them they never used, but they kept them handy so they never had a scarcity of ideas! In your group, share stories of other groups that supported lots of ideas. Create in your group specific times for innovation when lots of creativity is supported and new ideas can come be tried out. Use tools to encourage that kind of creativity, like Mind Mapping, brainstorming, or creative skits.

### **Find the underlying cause of the Killer Phrase**

Find out if the Killer Phrase is hiding an important question. For example, "It's not in the budget" might be raising the question, "How much will it cost?" Or "We've tried that before" might be asking "How is this different from what we did last time?"

### **And don't forget:**

If the idea fits within your group's goals, get the group to experiment with the idea! Try an experiment that allows the group to minimise resources if it fails. And then, if it does fail, don't despair – with less killer phrases, you'll have lots of ideas!

### **Where tool comes from:**

Daniel Hunter, Training for Change, 1501 Cherry St, Philadelphia, PA 19102 • [www.TrainingforChange.org](http://www.TrainingforChange.org)