



# Iconoclasts

## Flying in the face of convention

By Don Hill

**T**hey're everywhere. You know them: the people who make other people in your organization feel uncomfortable.

If you're familiar with my broadcast ventures, thus far, you'll also know that I've been labeled outspoken and provocative; it is a role I've come to accept over the years. People aren't necessarily upset with me *personally*, but take great exception to the ideas I often bring to the table—issues that are disturbing or dangerous to the status quo.

"You are a pest," Ruben Nelson, president of Square One Management said, reflecting on one of my incarnations in Alberta's provincial media. "But you are a necessary one."

Every organization has its *outsiders*—the dreamers with crackpot ideas that have a whisper of truth about them—seeds of innovation come from these folks.

There are also people around the table who mix things up and are seemingly at odds with just about everyone and everything. Cantankerous—their actions seem premeditated to offend. So why have them around if they're so disruptive?

"In general, organizations need them," David Horth said with a wry smile. A facilitator at the Center for Creative Leadership at the Banff Centre, one of the world's top think-tanks concerned with the study of leading and leadership, he has a healthy regard for the iconoclast in every organization.

Cirque du Soleil, the internationally renowned circus troupe based in Montreal, underscores the value of maverick thinking. At "some of their important senior management meetings," Horth noted, "a clown is invited, who is basically there to be provocative, dissenting and stir things up!"

Given an opportunity, he added, "I would probably be that clown."

Leaders must keep the door open to oddball thinking. There is plenty to learn from people who only accept *k-n-o-w* for an answer.

"I think you're seeing a change of the guard in the sector," according to Charlie Fischer, the CEO of Nexen Inc., a key player in the northern Alberta oilsands, alongside its other major petroleum interests around the world.

"In the early days of the industry it was very much *command and control*—you did what you were told," Fisher recalled. "But I think in the environment we're in today, where knowledge is king, you've got to come up with good ideas. You have to get those ideas early."

Enter the maverick, the iconoclast who serves as the vanguard of what could be lurking just over the horizon line... information that has a probability of affecting your organization, but at the outset seems so unusual, so strange and 'out there', that it doesn't seem to have any immediate utility.

Iconoclasts tend to be a nuisance and you should budget for being ticked off, but they are a useful 'early warning system'. And "if you throw bureaucracy in the way," Fischer warned, "it doesn't happen."

"It's really important to have a very open structure, and a structure that supports communication and a transfer of knowledge," he continued. "The competition is supposed to be outside our walls—not inside our walls."

But how do you manage unconventional thinkers and their at-odds-behaviour with the organizational infrastructure, which sometimes declares that they're not just outside of the box, but are off in a bewildering wilderness of their own making. You would not be remiss to assign their counsel a cautionary *post-it* as nuts, prickly, paranoid even.

Stay with me.

**iconoclast** ~ 1. a destroyer of sacred images, specifically 2. one who attacks and seeks to overthrow traditional or popular ideas or institutions [from Medieval Greek *eikonoklasts*, "image breaker"]

**curmudgeon** ~ 1. a surly person 2. a miser

**surly** ~ grumpy or habitually uncivil; gruff [Variant of obsolete *sirly*—originally "lordly," masterful, imperious, from *sir*.]

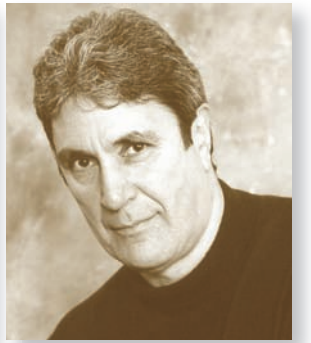
from *The Tormont Webster's Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary*

"I realize that we can't all be chefs in the kitchen... we have to have followers as well," explained John Dormaar, a research scientist, emeritus now at Agriculture Canada in Lethbridge, with a reputation for unconventional thinking that has literally broken new ground. His pioneering work in the soil sciences has improved agricultural practices around the world. "Sometimes we are wrong to be different. But still everybody in my books has the right to be different and try to follow their intuitions."

"You must realize that this is an emotionally demanding thing to do," Brian Crowley, director of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies said with a furrowed brow. He's no stranger to 'thinking different', flying in the face of convention from his perch at the Halifax-based think-tank. "You have to be willing to take that projection of anger and rejection and say 'I don't care what you project onto me emotionally. I'm still here to tell you that the idea is not right and there is a better idea, this is what it is, and why it's better.'"



Brian Crowley



David Horth

Crowley is correct.

There is another way and it is called a 'skunkworks'; the original term is attributed to a much-storied division within Lockheed-Martin, a huge conglomerate. During World War II, it developed advanced technology and hardware that made a significant contribution toward ending the global conflict with a decisive victory.

Today, a *skunkworks* is typically a small gathering of innovative thinkers from within a larger organization. These are the people who come up with the radical new designs and products—ideas that don't have to immediately go to market or be subject to performance targets, such as a specific return on investment within a business cycle. Call it *pure research* by people who defy convention within the larger institutional framework—the people who tend to get lost before they discover something new. You must trust in *their* process. When they win, they do tend to win big.

There is another important voice that needs to be heeded, no matter how uncomfortable it may be to listen to what they go on and on and on about. If you are a freshly-minted leader... pay particular attention to the musings of the curmudgeon, often the senior person sitting close to the exit door, who asks, "the very questions that must not be asked," said David Horth, with a laugh.

"The danger in [today's] organizations is there's literally a gap between people who know stuff and have been around for awhile, and people a little wet behind the ears and think they know stuff," Horth elaborated, gesturing with his hand in a knowing way.

"This is the big year for retirement of people 60-plus," a trend that is not limited to Canada and the United States. As one of the so-called *baby-boomers*, who is staring down retirement in a few years, Horth knows that the institutional "role of curmudgeon is going to probably vanish very quickly in the next little while." The maxim of use it—*it* meaning the contrarian views curmudgeon's are reputed to have—or lose it is real.

Not to worry.

"The curmudgeons are going to turn out to be consultants," he warned and, just as quickly, broke into a wide grin, laughing heartily with the thought of future prospects. ✓

*Don Hill is a 'thought leader' at the Leadership Lab and Leadership Development at the Banff Centre. He is also an award-winning writer and broadcaster with a large footprint on the Internet. Listen to his radio series Inspiring Leadership, a 20-part documentary on contemporary leadership and the challenge of leading in the 21st Century every Saturday morning at 8 AM on the CKUA Radio Network.*

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