

Horse Holders: A Case History of Innovation

I would like to retell the story of the guns, as written up in the wonderful essay "Gunfire at Sea: A Case History of Innovation" by E. Morison. Originally written in 1950, this essay can be found in M.L. Tushman and W.L. Moore's *Readings in the Management of Innovation* (New York, HarperBusiness, 1988). It remains my favorite for explaining why technology innovation takes time in organizations. The essay (indeed, the whole *Readings* book) is wonderful and highly recommended.

"In the early days of [WWII] when armaments of all kinds were in short supply, the British, I am told, made use of a venerable field piece that had come down to them from previous generations. The honorable past of this light artillery stretched back, in fact, to the Boer War. In the days of uncertainty after the fall of France, these guns, hitched to trucks, served as useful mobile units in the coast defence. But it was felt that the rapidity of fire could be increased. A time-motion expert was, therefore, called in to suggest ways to simplify the firing procedures. He watched one of the gun crews of five men at practice in the field for some time. Puzzled by certain aspects of the procedures, he took some slow-motion pictures of the soldiers performing the loading, aiming, and firing routines.

"When he ran these pictures over once or twice, he noticed something that appeared odd to him. A moment before the firing, two members of the gun crew ceased all activity and came to attention for a three-second interval extending throughout the discharge of the gun. He summoned an old colonel of artillery, showed him the pictures and pointed out his strange behavior. What, he asked the colonel, did it mean. The colonel, too, was puzzled. He asked to see the pictures again. 'Ah,' he said when the performance was over, 'I have it. They are holding the horses.'"

Do you have any horse-holders in your organization?

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