



A Culture of Risk Taking

Author : Mike Smith

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[An interesting article](#) in Sunday's *New York Times* reported that the fight against cancer is going more slowly than many had hoped considering the large amounts of federal funding for scientific research. One reason is that the grants tend to focus conservatively on small projects that only produce incremental progress. According to Dr. Otis W. Brawley, chief medical officer at the American Cancer Society, "the problem in science is that the way you get ahead is by staying within narrow parameters and doing what other people are doing. No one wants to fund wild new ideas." The problem is that it may be the unorthodox idea that produces a major breakthrough in curing cancer, but the current federal grant system discourages that kind of risk taking.

The article reminded me of a discussion about the nature of scientific discovery in [The Making of the Atomic Bomb](#) by Richard Rhodes. "In scientific work, creative thinking demands seeing things not seen previously, or in ways not previously imagined; and this necessitates jumping off from 'normal' positions, and taking risks by departing from reality." The Manhattan Project gave great scientists the freedom to "push alone into the raw original," which produced major advances in physics (with frightening results) that would not have happened without a culture of risk taking.

The School is not involved in scientific discovery, but thinking about the downside of the overly cautious approach to funding cancer research made me wonder about our work. Are we open to "wild new ideas" that might improve our work with public officials, or that might improve governmental systems in North Carolina? How do we create and support a culture of risk taking that could lead to significantly greater progress in our work? Our work is different from scientific research in important ways, but perhaps there are valuable lessons to be learned from the culture that produces great science.