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Beyond Brainstorming: By Supercharging Your Corporate Innovation Process, John Sweeney Sets You Apart from the Herd.

*In the 21st century economy, your people are all that separates you from the competition.
Improvisation guru and author John Sweeney offers five reasons
to transform them into idea factories.*

Minneapolis, MN (February 2005)—Are your employees innovation superstars? If you can't answer with a confident, enthusiastic, and immediate *yes*, you might as well close your doors now. Why? Because your people are all you have. Let's say it again: *Your people are all you have*. In a world where technology is obsolete five minutes after it's unveiled and globalization ensures that someone, somewhere can make it faster, cheaper, and/or better than you, maximizing your human capital is no longer optional. That's the word from John Sweeney, a highly unusual man who wants to help you transform your people into idea factories.

“Turning on and nurturing a self-perpetuating cycle of new, creative, and ultimately profitable ideas is every company's holy grail,” says John Sweeney, author of *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: 8 Secrets to World Class Idea Generation* (Aerialist Press, 2005, ISBN: 0-9762184-0-2, \$24.95). “Or at least it should be. It's the only thing that sets you apart from your competitors. But too many business leaders don't know where those ideas are or how to get to them.”

“What I tell them is, ‘Look, every one of your employees has unlimited creativity locked inside them,’” says Sweeney. “‘And I do mean *everyone*, from your temp-agency receptionist to your most stressed-out middle manager to your most buttoned-down executive. The human mind has amazing potential. But unless you deliberately put in place a process to draw those ideas out, well, they're just going to stay locked up behind the ‘That's not my job’ beliefs and the shyness and the fear of authority and the backlogged to-do lists.’”

Sweeney and his colleagues at the forty-six-year-old Brave New Workshop (BNW) use improvisational theatre techniques to help corporations conduct richly productive brainstorming sessions out of which come incredibly innovative and profitable ideas. Yes, you read that right. BNW is a well-known and highly successful satirical comedy theatre that, in recent years, has begun sharing its secrets with the business world. (**NOTE TO EDITOR: See attached tip sheet.**) Dozens of big name corporations like 3M, Disney, GMAC, American Express, and General Mills have availed themselves of his company's services, not to mention plenty of lesser-known medium and small firms.

Now, if you've ever participated in one of those painful, two-or-three-loud-mouths-shout-out-a-bunch-of-half-baked-ideas-while-everyone-else-hurls-criticisms-or-sits-wordlessly-in-the-corner "brainstorming" meetings, you may be cringing right now. But fear not: Sweeney's tried-and-true techniques help you avoid such unproductive (and, let's face it, unpleasant) scenes. If feedback from former clients is to be believed, his sessions are inspiring, fruitful, and fun.

In a typical corporate ideation workshop, Sweeney will help employees generate 1,000 one-sentence ideas in a one-day session. (He calls this fast and furious spawning of ideas the "Jiffy Pop" phenomenon.) Then, Sweeney teaches the client how to pour these ideas through a seven-step "creative funnel" that separates the wheat from the chaff, sets up a structure for collaboration, and ultimately ends in a product being brought to market.

"Perhaps the most beneficial part of our process is the practical application portion, in which the idea gets fleshed out and prepared for implementation," says Sweeney. "The only way an idea can become profitable is by taking it from the brainstorming session and the individual mind to the factory floor and company conference rooms. Our process explains how and when to implement constraints into idea generation in order to bring true gems into fruition."

So do *you* need to implement a BNW-style ideation process? Sweeney says *yes*, and he offers some very sound reasons why:

- **The up-front focus on *quantity* ensures that the best ideas will rise to the top.** It's just simple math. When 1,000 ideas are generated up front, odds are good that at least one of them is absolutely brilliant. If, on the other hand, a session ends after four or five—or even ten or twenty—ideas have been generated, the wellspring of real brilliance probably hasn't even been tapped. You're far more likely to end up picking a mediocre idea, investing lots of time and money in it, and bringing it to market . . . only to see it fail. "Sometimes you have to dig really, really deep to find the perfect idea," says Sweeney. "Our process ensures you don't stop the process before the real gems are discovered."

• **Scheduling innovation makes it a priority.** You know how it is. You'd love to put some energy toward developing new products and services, but there doesn't seem to be any time. Even if someone does come up with the occasional "big idea," it ends up on the back burner. You're too busy meeting customer demands, putting out fires, dealing with people issues, and so forth. Who has time for innovation? "*You* do," asserts Sweeney. "Nothing is more important than innovation. Treat it as an event, schedule it, make it a priority. Just do it. Scheduling the innovation process gives it the amount of time and attention it deserves. Companies too often rush to production, giving that phase most of their time and energy. Had they spent more time in the creative brainstorming phase, many of the problems could have been worked out there."

• **The BNW process releases the hidden genius in *everyone*.** Here's the problem with typical "brainstorming" sessions: the loudest people tend to be heard because, well, they're the loudest. Quieter people and analytical "scientist/engineer" types get lost in the melee. Perhaps they're viewed as sullen, disconnected, or lacking in ideas (and subsequently, are not invited to the next meeting). But being an introvert or a natural analyzer doesn't equal "no ideas." "There's a reason Secret Three emphasizes 'accept all styles,'" says Sweeney. "Some people just work better when they have time to mull things over in private. Even some extroverts work this way. In our workshops we hold everyone accountable for contributing ideas, but how they contribute those ideas is a matter of personal preference."

• **It fosters employee buy-in, which is critical to success.** It's a self-evident truth that what people have a hand in creating, they love and nurture. Because the BNW ideation process gets everyone involved in creating a new product, from conception to birth so to speak, all team members want it to succeed. Apathy is replaced by engagement, commitment, and passion. The product being brought to market is, after all, their "child." It wasn't someone else's idea imposed on them from above. And that buy-in can make all the difference between whether a new product succeeds or fails and, looking long-term, determines the fate of entire companies.

• **It creates a culture that attracts good people and keeps them with you.** The ideation process is empowering, challenging, stimulating, and fun. It allows *everyone* to contribute to the creative process, which gives employees a sense of purpose. It fosters passion. Indeed, the "innovation" mindset spills out of the ideation sessions and becomes an integral part of your company culture. People *want* to work for you and they are excited about coming in each day. They're less likely to seek out a bigger paycheck because they're getting something from you that's more valuable than money. "Once you've created a company that attracts the best and the brightest, the hard part is done," says Sweeney. "You've set in motion a self-perpetuating cycle of success."

"Of course, all the 'feel good' reasons aside, the big reason to transform your people into innovation superstars has a dollar sign in front of it," says Sweeney. "It's just good business. Ideas are the wellspring of profit, and more ideas means better ideas. It's a mathematical certainty. Look, in a very, very, very tough global economy, your people are your edge. Period."

You absolutely must bring out their brilliance, push them to do their best work. If you're just coasting on fumes, a competitor *will* swoop in and take your place. Let the spirit of innovation be your fuel and, well, who knows where you could end up? One thing's for certain, this process will create results. You'll have more and better options than you ever had before."

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About the Author:

John Sweeney is world leader in workplace innovation. Years ago, John left a successful corporate real estate career to follow his passion for performing improvisational comedy. Today, he has found a way to combine his business insights with his passion for improv. He conducts more than 100 training workshops and keynote speeches a year for some of the largest (and smallest) companies in the world. John is the owner of the Brave New Workshop Theatre (the nation's oldest satirical comedy theatre and world-renowned school for improvisation), is a member of the National Speakers Association, has appeared in dozens of television commercials, and is the author of a major motion picture screenplay. He lives in Deephaven, Minnesota, with his wife, Jenni, son, William, and dog, Burt.

About the Book:

Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: 8 Secrets to World Class Idea Generation (Aerialist Press, 2005, ISBN: 0-9762184-0-2, \$24.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and major online booksellers.

For more information, please visit www.BraveNewWorkshop.com.