

BUSINESS IS A STAGE, WE ARE MERELY PLAYERS

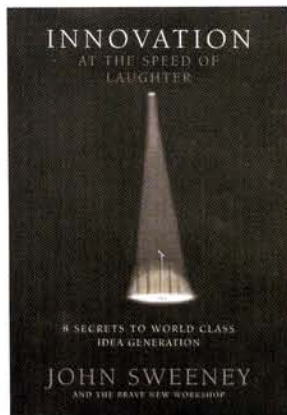
BY LEE HURLEY

IN THE EARLY 1990S, John Sweeney took a class in improvisational comedy. He loved it so much he left his job as a commercial insurance consultant and went to work for \$200 a week in the Dudley Riggs Brave New Workshop Comedy Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In his book, *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: 8 Secrets to World Class Idea Generation*, Sweeney writes, "Eleven years later, my wife Jenni Lilledahl and I own that very same theatre." Evidently, Sweeney recognized a direct connection between innovation in improvisational comedy and innovation in business, which must be why he created an educational arm of the company called the Brave New Institute. The corporate services side of the Institute has consulted with business heavyweights such as Hewlett Packard, General Mills, 3M, Disney, and Sprint PCS. According to Sweeney, *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter* is his attempt to share the theatre's secrets of innovation with a broader audience.

As outlined in the book's chapter titles, those secrets are: Accepting All Ideas; Deferring Judgment; Sharing Focus and Accepting Styles; Declarations; Create a Statusless Environment; Create a Reward System that Recognizes Innovation and Creative Risk-Taking; Yes, First!; and Perceiving Change as Fuel.

One noticeable weakness in Sweeney's system is that several of the ideas seem to overlap. Wouldn't one necessarily Defer Judgment if one were to Accept All Ideas? Another is that the ideas are in many ways merely a statement of the obvious.

Perhaps not canceling but certainly combating these weaknesses is the fact that Sweeney is not simply trying to espouse a set of ideas he has developed as a consultant, but rather he is laying out his standards for successful improvisational comedy, which certainly makes for a more entertaining read.



His attempts to tie those standards to corporate idea generation may or may not work for you or me, but it's hard to deny Sweeney's understanding of what makes improvisational comedy funny. Moreover, anyone who has ever watched "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" has probably noticed that teamwork and creative thinking are key ingredients to making people laugh.

In Chapter 7, "Perceiving Change as Fuel," Sweeney writes, "Improvisers view change quite differently than most people. We often hear that many people are adverse to change and find comfort in stability and consistency. Unfortunately, for the improviser, if a scene is not changing then it is stagnant, repetitive, and predictable—and our customers go away. It is from this point of view that we approach our perception and appreciation for change. We do not see change as an interruption of what is reliable and consistent, but as an exciting exploration toward what is next. Change is not a necessary evil but rather a vehicle of opportunity that allows us to discover and heighten the next part of the scene."

Again, there is nothing earth-shatteringly new about the concept of embracing change, but it's interesting to see it in artistic terms. Another noteworthy parallel is the theatre's funnel process, which could just as easily be mistaken for a manufacturing facility process (which, in a sense, is exactly what it is). The funnel begins day one, the first day of rehearsal, and ends at day 56, which is opening night. The funnel covers Idea Generation, Refinement, Collaboration, Engineering, Focus Groups, Road Testing, and finally Product to Market. Sweeney recounts numerous examples of ideas that, early in the process, seemed destined for the scrapheap, but in the end proved successful. He writes, "The theme for the show we were writing was 'humor in the workplace.' During the idea-sharing portion of the process, one of the actors declared, 'The most important job in the world is copy repair person.' . . . Later in the brainstorming session, another

"For the improviser, if a scene is not changing then it is stagnant, repetitive, and predictable—and our customers go away."

actor declared, 'I hate *Riverdance*.' . . . In adhering to the BNW creative funnel process, we immediately added the *Riverdance* idea to the list without question, comment, or judgment. As

those two ideas traveled down through our creative process, they eventually and organically met and combined. The newly formed idea was then expanded and refined. Ultimately, the end product was a fully choreographed song, specifically a *Riverdance* parody that told the story of a third-generation, Irish, immigrant copy repairman named Seamus O'Leary. The piece closed the first act of the show and received a standing ovation."

In the end, the appeal of *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter* is found less in the freshness of its ideas than in its recognition that artistic endeavors and enlightened business practices are so similar. And even though the ideas are well-worn, they are delivered in a creative and humorous manner, which is more than one can hope for in most "self-help" business writing. As Shakespeare asserted, there may be nothing new under the sun, but there is value in seeing old ideas in a new light. **ET**