



CREDIT UNION EXECUTIVE

April 2005

Web Exclusives

Supercharge Innovation At Your CU

Employees are your top differentiator in today's economy, according to John Sweeney, author of "Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: 8 Secrets to World Class Idea Generation."

"Turning on and nurturing a self-perpetuating cycle of new, creative, and ultimately profitable ideas is every company's holy grail—or at least it should be," says Sweeney. "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." He offers eight "secrets for generating big, bold, creative, profitable ideas:"

Secret 1: Accept all ideas. That's right. All ideas, not just those you feel comfortable with or that seem to make sense. You won't be able to implement every idea, but you must greet them all with gratitude, respect, and a positive attitude. Acceptance makes people comfortable enough that they feel free to submit more ideas. The more ideas you start with, the better the end product. You may end up combining several ideas, and the final result may bear little resemblance to its initial form.

Secret 2: Defer judgment. Deferring judgment allows ideas to ferment, split, mutate, and grow. In its final form, an idea may not look anything like the spark that started it, but if you snuff that spark out at its birth, it's guaranteed not to flame up into something brilliant.

Secret 3: Share focus and accept all styles. During a brainstorming session, no one style of communication should be allowed to hog the spotlight. Everyone must be respectful, step back, and let others speak. Likewise, keep in mind that some people may not want the spotlight. Some people feel uncomfortable shouting out ideas in a group. Implement mechanisms that allow such people to participate in ways that best suit their personality and style. This doesn't mean that introverts or analytical types get a free pass. It may mean that they submit their ideas in writing.

Secret 4: Declarations. Let people declare their points of view early and strongly. If this isn't the norm at your company, you're probably familiar with the "meeting after the meeting" phenomenon. This is when after the meeting adjourns, people huddle in small groups and talk about what they really think. Make it clear that people need to share their ideas when someone can actually use the information. And do whatever it takes to foster a sense of creative safety. When people feel safe and comfortable, they'll be much more willing to speak up.

Secret 5: Create a status-free environment. When you hold a brainstorming session, make it clear that there's no leader. This flattening of hierarchy increases the group's comfort level, openness, and productivity.

Secret 6: Create a reward system that recognizes innovation and creative risk taking. Most companies base their reward systems on results. This may seem logical on the surface, but consider that you have to produce dozens or hundreds of ideas before reaching a final product. It makes more sense to reward the process that leads to the end result, not the result itself.

Consider creating awards for the most ideas or the most outlandish ideas. Such awards send the message that it's okay to think differently.

Secret 7: Yes, first. "Yes, first" is the opposite of "no, but." In the world of improvisational comedy, the first improviser declares a point of view or idea, and the second improviser says "yes" to the idea and then adds to it. By saying "yes, first," you're not

agreeing to implement the idea. You're simply acknowledging the intrinsic value and potential it possesses.

Secret 8: Perceive change as fuel. Successful innovators embrace change. Ironically, the ability to deal with change has less to do with predicting the future than it does with living in the now. You want your employees to "be in the moment." Assure employees that they have the skills to deal with whatever comes next. Urge them to savor the excitement and adventure that comes with living in the midst of change.

"Innovation at the Speed of Laughter" (Aerialist Press, 2005, ISBN: 0-9762184-0-2) is available at bookstores nationwide and at major online booksellers. For information, visit www.speedoflaughter.com.