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Laughing All the Way to the Bank

Improv comedian John Sweeney helps businesses unclog the idea pipeline

By Robert Chappell



It's a timeout at a Minnesota Timberwolves game. A dance contest gets out of hand. A five-foot-ten, 250-pound fan with no business disrobing does just that. He won't quit boogying until two policemen escort him away. The video makes SportsCenter nine times over the next two days; the next day's headline reads "Jiggly Boy Helps Wolves Beat Dallas." The Twin Cities media names him Fan of the Year.

And it's all an act. Even the cops are fake.

"We fooled them all," says Madison native John Sweeney. The stunt had its origins when the

Timberwolves' management admitted fan enthusiasm left something to be desired. "They golf-clap a slam dunk," says Sweeney. "It's stupid." The Wolves hired Sweeney to help them generate excitement, and that he did.

Sweeney, thirty-nine, travels the nation using his experience as an improv comedy actor to teach corporate leaders how to generate great ideas and, in some cases, to help them implement those ideas. That job is one of three divisions of his Twin Cities company, Brave New Workshop (BNW). It's also home to a comedy theater and improv acting school.

The Timberwolves stunt serves as an example of the second of the eight secrets detailed in Sweeney's book, *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: defer judgment.*



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The dance contest idea seemed harebrained at the outset, but after what Sweeney calls some "fermentation," it came off beautifully, fake cops and all.

"It's really easy to shoot down an idea," Sweeney says. "But you're also shooting down that idea's potential to spur new ideas."

While helping corporate clients like Microsoft, Yahoo! and 3M find success, BNW has found some success of its own. It is one of the only arts organizations in the nation that doesn't take grants from government or nonprofits. "You can be a self-sustaining part of the business community without standing there with your hand out," Sweeney says.

Much of that fiscal success has come since 1997, when Sweeney bought the company. BNW has grown from seven full-time employees to fifty-two since then, and from \$176,000 in revenue in 1997 to a projected \$2.1 million in 2005.

"I keep thinking, 'What if we're the only theater company in the nation with a 401(k)?' Actors are stupid financially. But I for one have no intention of being poor. It wouldn't be the Sweeney way. I'm an Edgewood graduate. We're supposed to be privileged," Sweeney jokes.

Robert Chappell is a staff writer for Madison Magazine.

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