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Eight Secrets for Generating Big, Bold, Creative, Profitable Ideas

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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 In a world where technology is obsolete five minutes after it's unveiled and globalization ensures that someone, somewhere can make it faster, cheaper, and/or better than you, maximizing your human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.

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. 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."

Secret 1: Accept All Ideas. That's right. All ideas, not just the ones that you feel comfortable with or that seem to make sense. Obviously, you're not going to implement every idea (especially considering the fact that you're aiming for 1,000 of them in the initial generation phase!), 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 and more ideas. Remember, 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. Recalling a brainstorming session when working as a corporate real estate consultant: "The leader and facilitator began the session by letting everyone know the purpose of the session was to really 'think outside the box.' The leader asked everyone to let his or her hair down and think as nontraditionally as possible. The session then started and one of us spouted forth an idea—perhaps not a great idea, but one we thought was spontaneous, nontraditional, and possibly even innovative. The facilitator stopped the session and said something like, 'Come on, people, stop screwing around. We've got to focus.' Don't do this. Deferring judgment allows ideas to ferment, to split, to mutate, to grow. Think of the mathematical possibilities that 1,000 ideas could spawn! In its final form, an idea may not look anything like the spark that started it all, 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. There are many people who feel uncomfortable shouting out ideas in a group. Be sure to put mechanisms in place that allow such people to participate in ways that best suit their personality and style. This does not mean that introverts or analytical types get a "free pass." It may mean that they submit their required twenty-five ideas in writing. Keep in mind that Albert Einstein was labeled by many as lazy and arrogant by traditional academic standards of the time because he preferred a process of discovery and innovation that was isolated and introspective.

Secret 4: Declarations. Make sure that people feel free to declare their point 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. The facilitator closes the meeting with the question "Does anyone have anything else to say?" and is met with silence, ceiling tile gazing, and pencil twiddling. Then, after the meeting is adjourned, people retreat to the restroom or lounge, huddle in small groups, and begin to talk about what they really thought. Make it clear to people that they need to say what they have to say right away, when someone can actually use the information. (Remind them that the only way to affect the solution is to be heard at this stage of the process.) 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 creative ideation session, make it crystal clear to the group that there is no "leader." This flattening of hierarchy increases the comfort level, openness, and productivity of the group. Tell the team that titles, salaries, and corner offices (or cubicles) are meaningless during the session. Admittedly, this is easier said than done, but a status-free environment will evolve over time. In its work with corporate clients, the Brave New Workshop often "levels the field" by having actors perform sketches that portray real workplace scenarios, a technique that demonstrates to the team that the leader understands the issues they're facing . . . and helps them laugh about it.

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 the fact that you have to produce dozens or even hundreds of ideas before you can ever get to a final product. Doesn't it make more sense to reward the process that leads to the end result, not the result itself? Some of Sweeney's clients create awards for the most ideas or even the most outlandish ideas. Such awards send the message that it's okay to think differently. Know, also, that an award doesn't have to mean a trophy or a bonus check—sincere verbal affirmation, offered when a person blurts out an unedited idea, can be highly motivating.

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. You can use this principle in a corporate brainstorming session to achieve the "Jiffy Pop" phenomenon. In effect, if not literally, people must say "yes" to a teammate's idea before submitting their own—even if they disagree. 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: Perceiving Change As Fuel. While it's only human to find comfort in stability and consistency, the reality is that change in the business world is inevitable. Like improvisers, successful innovators embrace change. They see it as an exciting exploration toward what is next. Ironically, the ability to deal with change has less to do with trying to predict the future than it does with living in the now. You want your employees to "be in the moment." If you sense that they are depleting their energy worrying about future variables, bring them back to the task at hand. Assure them 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.