

## How to Turn Your Team Into An Idea Machine

by John Sweeney

Turning on and nurturing a self-perpetuating cycle of fresh, creative, and ultimately profitable ideas can help your team become profit leaders, visionaries, and, ultimately, a smooth-running “idea machine.” By establishing a mindset driven by innovative ideation, you and your team can quickly increase the quality and quantity of ideas you discover and create a culture others envy -- and you and your team enjoy.

But what if your team doesn't believe they can create the idea machine? What if the last big idea the group had was to start happy hour at 4 pm instead of 5 pm? Hope is not lost. My work with hundreds of clients has brought me to eight basic behaviors that help anyone and everyone learn how to generate more and better ideas. They stem from the ancient traditions of improvisational theater and the belief that all individuals are created innovatively equal and innovatively perfect. As we get older, we tend to create perceived notions of what is right and wrong and view ourselves and others as innovative or not. We often act as editors to our own ideas and talents and even critique the ideas of others, almost instinctively. Despite our learned reactions, I believe we can all practice some key skills that will enable any individual or group to create ideas at amazing speed and quality. I offer up these eight secrets for generating big, bold, creative, and profitable ideas:

**Secret 1: Accept All Ideas.** That's right. All the ideas your team shares, not just the ones that you feel comfortable with or that seem to make sense. Obviously, you're not going to implement every idea, but you must greet them all with gratitude, respect, and a positive attitude. Be accepting to yourself and to others. Accept ideas without editing, especially in the initial phase of brainstorming or idea generation. Acceptance makes you and your team more comfortable creating with, and sharing, ideas. You will most likely end up combining several ideas to create a hybrid idea that is better than any of the originals. The more ideas you start with, the more likely it is that your end solution will be innovative.

**Secret 2: Defer Judgment.** When I was working in corporate real estate, I attended several brainstorming sessions that went like this. 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, this is a

brainstorming session! Stop screwing around. We've got to focus." Don't do this. What is there to gain by critiquing ideas in the initial part of an ideation process? Deferring judgment allows ideas to ferment, to split, to mutate, to grow. 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. Let the math happen, this secret can take your original pool of ideas and allow them to produce something miraculous!

Secret 3: Share Focus and Accept All Styles. There is no one "best" way to communicate ideas at the beginning of the process. There are many people who feel uncomfortable shouting out ideas in a group. Put mechanisms in place which allow you and others to participate in ways that best suit personality and style. This does not mean that introverts or analytical types get a "free pass." It may mean that they simply contribute their ideas in writing. Determine how your team is most comfortable generating and expressing ideas. Remember the goal at the beginning of the process is volume, so get those ideas out in whatever way works!

Secret 4: Declarations. Make sure individuals declare a point of view early and often. If this isn't the norm, 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. It is important each team member "declares" right away, when someone can actually use the information. If an idea or point of view is not shared, the opportunity to react to it and create yet another idea that has potential has been lost. Declare, politely and quickly!

Secret 5: Create a Status-free Environment. When you take part in a creative ideation session, help to create an environment where there is no "leader." This flattening of hierarchy increases the comfort level, openness, and productivity of the entire group. Remind everyone that titles, salaries, and corner offices (or cubicles) are meaningless during the session. Admittedly, this is easier said than done, but freeing the team from perceived status will help you and others share ideas more effectively. Try to remember that when it comes to simply creating new ideas at the beginning of the process, we are all perfectly equal. If your team doubts their ability to create lots of new ideas, watch 5-year olds play for a few minutes and then do what they do.

Secret 6: Create a Reward System That Recognizes Innovation and Creative Risk Taking. Most companies base their reward systems on results. This certainly makes sense, but consider the fact that you have to produce dozens or even hundreds of ideas before you can ever get to a final product or solution. Doesn't it make more sense to also reward the process that leads to the end result? Embrace this concept and reward your team for ideas. No matter how

outlandish, unusable, or outrageous they may be. Writers need to write, but not every word becomes a phrase or poem or book. Musicians need to play, but not every melody becomes a song or tune or jingle. The point here is that writers and musicians consider it “rewarding” and productive when they create something which is seemingly “useless” to the rest of the world. If your team is to become an idea machine and idea generation is considered a craft, then a similar mentality will keep everyone inspired to continue generating ideas.

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. We’ve seen this principle applied to corporate brainstorming sessions to achieve the “Jiffy Pop” phenomenon. By saying “yes, first,” you’re not agreeing to implement the idea. You’re simply acknowledging the intrinsic value and potential it possesses. Don’t think of something and then immediately tell yourself, “no, we can’t do that because...” Say yes to the idea out of habit, store it in your idea warehouse, and move on. Perhaps the group will come back to it with a new twist later on. The conjunction of “yes, and” will create ideas at the speed of laughter!

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. Strive to “be in the moment.” If you sense the energy being depleted worrying about future variables, come back to the task at hand. Reassure yourself and the team that they possess the skills to deal with whatever comes next. Savor the excitement and adventure that comes with living in the midst of change. The next great idea lies right behind some change.

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