

Contractor's Business Management Report

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BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT How to Generate More Profitable Ideas

Companies live and die by creative business development ideas, and while good ideas don't grow on trees, you can harvest them from your staff. "Every one of your employees has unlimited creativity locked inside," says John Sweeney, author of *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: 8 Secrets to World Class Idea Generation* (Aerialist Press, 2005; ISBN: 0-9762184-0-2; cost: \$ 24.95).

"Every one" includes the project manager on the job, the super on the site, the receptionist taking messages from owners, the controller reviewing the schedule of values, and your director of business development/marketing. Why? Everyone who has contact with the client and the client's agent has knowledge of their complaints, needs, and expectations. Your job is to unlock your staff's creativity by drawing out their ideas.

Brainstorming for more and better ideas. "When 1,000 ideas are generated up front," says Sweeney, "odds are good that at least one of them is absolutely brilliant. If, however, your brainstorming session ends after five or 10-or even 20-ideas have been generated, the wellspring of real brilliance probably hasn't even been tapped. Risk: You are far more likely to end up picking a mediocre idea, and investing lots of time and money in it, only to see it fail. "Sometimes you have to dig really, really deep to find the perfect idea," he adds.

Here's how:

Generating big, bold, profitable ideas. "Ideas are the wellspring of profit, and more ideas mean better ideas. It's a mathematical certainty," says Sweeney, who shares the following "secrets" for ensuring that you get lots of ideas from your next business development brainstorming session:

Secret #1: Accept all ideas. Not just the ones that you feel comfortable with or that seem to make sense. You're not going to implement every idea, but you must greet each one with gratitude, respect, and a positive attitude. Acceptance makes people feel free to submit more ideas. Remember: The more ideas you start with, the better the end product.

Secret #2: Defer judgment. In his book, Sweeney recalls a brainstorming session when he was 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 messing around. We've got to focus.'

"Don't do this. Deferring judgment allows ideas to ferment, to split, to mutate, to grow." Reminder: In its final form, an idea may not look anything like the spark that started it all, says Sweeney, "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. Here's the problem with typical brainstorming sessions: The loudest people tend to be heard because they are the loudest. Quieter people and analytical types get lost in the melee. But being an introvert or natural analyzer doesn't equal "no ideas." Don't allow one style of communication to "hog the spotlight." Everyone must be respectful and let others speak.

Likewise, keep in mind that some people may not want the spotlight. Many feel uncomfortable shouting out ideas in a group. Put mechanisms in place 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." Instead, it may mean that they submit their required 25 ideas in writing. "We hold everyone accountable for contributing ideas," says Sweeney, "but how they contribute those ideas is a matter of personal preference."

Secret #4: Encourage 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 gazing, and pencil twirling. 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. 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 to the group that there is no "leader." Tell the team that titles, salaries, and corner offices (or cubicles) are meaningless during the session. Flattening the hierarchy increases the comfort level, openness, and productivity of the group. Admittedly, this is easier said than done, but a status-free environment will evolve with practice.

Secret #6: Develop 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 will get to a final product. Doesn't it make more sense to reward the process that leads to the end result, instead of rewarding the result itself?

Some of Sweeney's clients create awards for the most ideas or 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: Adopt a "Yes, first!" mindset. "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 its intrinsic value and potential.

Secret #8: Perceive change as fuel. While it's only human to find comfort in stability and consistency, change is inevitable in the business world. Like improvisers, successful innovators embrace change 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.

Who has time for brainstorming? "You do," asserts Sweeney. "Nothing is more important than innovation. Treat it as an event, schedule it, and make it a priority. Scheduling the innovation process gives it the amount of time and attention it deserves.

"One thing's for certain, this process will create results. You'll have more and better options than you ever had before."