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Seat-of-the-pants INNOVATION

Your people are full of good ideas. Quick—call a meeting.

By Marc Hequet

You need ideas for new products? For new markets? For more effective hiring and training? For a better billing system?

You can always book a two-day retreat with a creativity consultant. That might cost you \$15,000 plus travel, lodging and incidentals.

Or maybe you can do some seat-of-the-pants innovating on your own. After all ... doesn't innovation just happen out of the blue?

"It does occasionally," says Steven Dahlberg, a Willimantic, Conn., creativity consultant. "But I think the challenge is: How do you make it happen more?" Dahlberg does a lot of thinking about thinking. Among other things, he's an adviser to a Guggenheim Museum education-research initiative on teaching problem-solving through visual arts.

Marc Hequet is a Minneapolis-based business writer.

Don't expect brilliant ideas to fall into your lap, at least not very often. It generally takes some work. "If you put the deliberate work into looking for alternatives and new ways of looking at challenges and problems," Dahlberg says, "you may have more breakthroughs."

How can you be more deliberate about innovating? We'll get to that in a moment. First, however, consider this: Your own people and your own products are a pretty good source of ideas in themselves.

Bud Weisbart, vice president at A&R Tarpaulins Inc. of Fontana, Calif., suggests that you be keenly aware of two things: what your company does best, and what your customers and prospective customers really need. You may find that a good product you already make also fits the bill in another context—whereupon you "tweak until you get something that works the right way," says Weisbart.

A&R realized, for example, that a rollover system it developed for tarps made as covers for over-the-road trucks functions just as well for restaurant patio shades.

And when aerospace manufacturer Lockheed Martin Corp. wanted a peek-proof curtain around a top-secret reconnaissance satellite it was building, A&R fabricated the enclosure

A key step is defining the challenge you face. Innovation that addresses a poorly defined problem—or the wrong problem entirely—is wasted brainpower.

out of much the same material it was already using as a wrap for cable bundles that shield electronic transmissions against electromagnetic interference—two layers of a Teflon® sand-wiching polyester impregnated with nickel and copper.

The Lockheed Martin satellite technicians go in through zippered openings in the adapted cable wrap, which is opaque to X-rays, visually secure, and protects the satellite against weather and debris.

“Tribal knowledge”

You can’t do that kind of innovation with people who just walked in the door. Long-term workers are invaluable, Weisbart says, for the “tribal knowledge” they wield collectively.

Turning newcomers into long-timers involves making employees feel as though they are an important part of your innovation process. “A good idea can originate anywhere in the organization,” says Jean Greaves, CEO at TalentSmart, a San Diego, Calif., leadership-development firm.

If you want those ideas, you must start early—invest in your workers. Send them to training to improve their job skills. Make it clear that you *listen*. That, says Greaves, “creates a culture of trust and open communication. In an environment of trust, people feel safe to experiment and take risks, which is exactly what you need to get ideas flowing.”

Or, you can just offer them money. “The employees are much more likely to speak up in a place where they actually have a chance of sharing in some of the profits—assuming there are some,” deadpans Bruce Phillips, a senior economist with the National Federation of Independent Business.

Okay, so ideas don’t always make the angels sing. That’s all part of the fun. And it should be fun, at least a little.

The right people

The process of innovation can start with the simple act of calling a meeting; but thereafter, doing it properly gets complicated.

It’s important at the outset to get the right people into the room. For a new product, of course, you need the ones who will actually build it. The people who are going to sell it should be there as well. Who’s going to market it? Bring her in. Who buys supplies? That person should be there as well. You may even want to involve your lawyer upfront if you anticipate legal issues.

Brainstorming itself isn’t rocket science: Generate lots of ideas. Be freewheeling. Defer judgment. Look for connections between ideas. “It’s not very complicated,” says Dahlberg, “but it’s often not followed very well.”

No surprise there; you’re asking bright, hardworking people to sit and listen to screwball ideas. That’s a formula for frustration if you don’t do it right.

During this process, however, screwball ideas should be *welcome*. That’s the fun part. Nutty notions loosen up the group and get everybody thinking. In fact, far-out suggestions may carry the seed of a solution—or at least provide a new insight into the problem.

Say you want to boost sales. Consider the extremes: Let’s try giving it away! Or, head the other way: Let’s quadruple our prices!

Crazy? Maybe. But let those notions float for a bit. Naysayers will soon enough have a chance to jump all over them, and articulating the reasons *not* to do something may carry the germ of an idea about what to do instead. Maybe you want to give away a sample of a new product, and then raise your prices a little when customers come back for more.

Innovation, step by step

Creativity consultant Steven Dahlberg suggests this brainstorming process.

First, *diverge*:

- **Capture ideas. As people brainstorm, ask somebody to write ideas on a flipchart. Number each idea for easy identification.**
- **Generate lots of ideas. Ask for one or more ideas from everybody. Quantity of ideas breeds quality ideas.**
- **Don’t judge ideas—at least not right away. Don’t criticize ideas as people generate them. Critiques come in the second round.**
- **Make connections. Build on and modify ideas people have offered. Look for new combinations of ideas that would work together.**
- **Allow “far-out” ideas. Wild ideas give you insight. Don’t be afraid to suggest something wacky. If it has a hint of a promise, you can always scale it back.**

Then, *converge*:

- **Evaluate. In the second round, identify your criteria for choosing from among the many ideas you wrote down in the first round.**
- **Select the best ideas based on those criteria, and discuss how the best ideas apply to the challenge at hand.**

YOUR BUSINESS

If you get bogged down, tell your innovation geniuses to forget everything else and just think about a tree; and then make connections about how the tree relates to your particular business challenge. Some call this lateral thinking, or metaphorical thinking. If nothing else, it kicks people out of their ruts for a while.

From clueless to close-minded

People already know how to be creative, says innovation consultant Min Basadur of Burlington, Ontario, Canada. His clients range from Microsoft to an industrial-fabrics firm that makes coverings for office chairs and cubicle dividers.

The trick, says Basadur, is getting people with different innovation styles to work together.

If you gather eight people to discuss a challenge, you may get eight different creativity styles in the room. One guy might be clueless on both problem and solutions. He's the one who doesn't even know why there's a meeting, or why he's been told to come. Another person,

your conceptualizer, is raring to go, excited about brainstorming solutions. Still another type, your implementer, already has a solution and is ready to put it into place.

A meeting of such minds can mean frustration and wasted time. "Implementers tend to downgrade conceptualizers because they take too long," says Basadur. "Conceptualizers tend to downgrade implementers because conceptualizers think the implementers don't think." So Basadur uses an eight-step process that engages, step by step, all the innovation styles he has identified.

This approach means asking your hurry-up implementers to be patient while the group first works on defining the problem. "When that's done, this process always works," Basadur claims. However, "if you let the implementers run roughshod, you may end up with the wrong problem, and it doesn't work so well."

Got that? A key step is defining the challenge you face. Innovation that ad-



dresses a poorly defined problem—or the wrong problem entirely—is wasted brainpower.

Basadur was with consumer-products giant Procter & Gamble (P&G) when its competitor, Colgate, came out with Irish Spring bath soap. P&G quickly set out to counter the successful brand with a knockoff ... but found consumer testers still preferred Irish Spring to P&G's own green-striped trial brand.

Developers were defining the wrong problem, says Basadur, who was with P&G through 1981. It wasn't about the stripes: It was about feeling refreshed after bathing. So P&G product developers began to think instead about how to give the showering public a little zip. The result: What turned out to be P&G's Coast brand beat Irish Spring in some consumer testing that followed. (P&G has since sold the brand to Dial Corp.)

If your innovators "take some time to define the problem," concludes Basadur, "they're well on the way to consensus."

In short, you've got an innovative bunch there—if they think you'll listen to them. And, if they will take time to listen to each other. And, if you know how to draw them out without driving each other crazy. **R**

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