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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

The Power of Weird Ideas

Creativity fuels innovation. Although most of us can intellectualize this, the challenge is often finding ways to make it happen. Robert Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford Engineering School, sheds some light on how to generate weird ideas that work. In his book, *Weird Ideas That Work: 11 1/2 Practices for Promoting, Managing, and Sustaining Innovation* (Free Press, 2001), Sutton presents tactics and strategies for bridging the innovation gap. "A weird idea works because it trips discomfort," says Sutton. "The idea is to flip from autopilot to mindful creation."

Sutton echoes what many of us have experienced, "what's weird is that people say that they want innovation, yet they can't depart from their deeply ingrained beliefs and practices about how to treat people, make decisions, and structure work." Good organizations, he says, organize themselves around two useful fictions: (1) routine work is guided by the assumption that everything is a permanent condition; decisions are made and work is structured as if the future will be a perfect imitation of the past, and (2) innovative work is to treat everything like a temporary condition; innovation is one of extreme urgency. The key is to create some kind of switching mechanism or signal system to guide work through the use of both approaches. Intel is a good example of this, often shifting from being in "copy exactly" mode to the domain of generating and wrestling with ideas by using their "constructive-confrontation" process.

Sutton's take on creativity is in line with what many of the experts believe - creativity isn't about wild talent as it is about the production of lots of ideas and experimentation. Sutton states:

- To find a few ideas that work, you need to try a lot that don't. In my research of creative Research & Development Scientists, experimentation was a fact of life for them, which started as early as age 10 - 12.
- It is impossible to generate a few good ideas without generating a lot of bad ideas. What would the world be like without Post-it notes if someone at 3M hadn't had a bad idea for someone build on.
- It isn't so much about original creation as it is about using old ideas in new ways, places, and combinations. To quote J.P. Guilford "...so many inventions involve simply putting the same old elements together in some new ways."

To fuel innovation, Sutton suggests that you need to hire great people; people who are very different from ourselves. For example:

- Hire slow learners, people who avoid, ignore, or reject how things are "supposed to be done around here." Then surround these slow learners with fast learners who understand how to promote their creative ideas.
- Hire people who make you uncomfortable - even those whom you don't like; once they are on board make sure you listen to their ideas. In my workshops, people often ask me how do I sell my ideas? Being a good listener to other people's ideas is often the starting point. The next time someone presents an outrageous idea to you, "stop, look, and listen" saying, "That's interesting...tell me more."
- Hire people whom you (probably) don't need right now in your organization; then ask them how they can help you. You will be amazed at what new perspectives this person can bring to your organization.
- Use job interviews to get new ideas, not to just screen candidates. Practice the 80/20 rule of interviewing, i.e.; as a interviewer you should be listening 80 percent of the time, and gain many new perspectives and ideas.
- Encourage people to ignore superiors and peers and do what they think is right rather than what they are told. Frances Horibe, in her book *Creating the Innovation Culture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2001) reminds us that great leaders seek out and encourage people who will challenge them and their rules.
- Find happy optimistic people, and let them fight for their ideas. Innovation comes when enthusiastic and passionate people persist with their ideas.
- Practice random acts of weirdness (I know, for some of us this is a real stretch!). Take time to explore outrageous ideas that none of your competitors are thinking about. Thinking up the dumbest and most impractical things that you can do is a powerful way to explore your assumptions about the world.

What's the Bottom line

Weird ideas can help you turn your organization from staid and safe to one that is creative and innovative.

This article is an adaptation of Polly LaBarre's "Fresh Start 2002: Weird Ideas That Work" article in *Fast Company* (<http://www.fastcompany.com/online/54/sutton.html>). If you want to learn more about tactics and strategies for innovation, I suggest picking up Sutton's provocative book, *Weird Ideas That Work: 11 1/2 Practices for Promoting, Managing, and Sustaining Innovation* (Free Press, 2001).



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