



Tucker on Innovation

Reporting on best practices, the latest research and upcoming events in the field of innovation, Tucker on Innovation is a free quarterly newsletter for organizational practitioners, thought leaders, and friends of the Global Innovation Movement. Past issues are archived on our website: <http://www.innovationresource.com>. Reprint permission granted upon request to the Editor at jwilliams@innovationresource.com. Copyright 2008, all rights reserved.

Judy Williams, Editor Third Quarter, 2008

Techniques for Getting Unstuck

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Tucker to Appear at These Special Upcoming Public Events . . .

IIR USA 2008
Innovation Immersion
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Phoenix, Arizona
October 20-22, 2008

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Pure Insight Ltd.
Innovation Leader
Summit 2008
London, UK
November 3-4, 2008

[Details](#)

1. Recognize you're stuck on a problem. If it is afternoon and you find yourself aimlessly surfing the Internet and avoiding the project you're on, this is a signal that you're stuck. If you draw a mindmap but can only come up with two options, ditto. Or, you call a meeting and silence fills the air - your group is stuck.
2. Realize that getting stuck is almost inevitable. If you're solving a complex problem or working on developing a big opportunity, you're going to bog down at some point. But it's what you do about it that's critically important. "Getting stuck and getting unstuck is all part of the process," a senior engineer at defense contractor ARA told me recently. "It doesn't scare me like it did when I was younger."
3. Recognize you're stuck, and then shift. Challenge yourself to alter perspective, environment, approach, creativity tools.
4. Create a checklist of things you can do to get back on track. Ask yourself what has worked in the past? Why do you feel you are stuck? Stumped? Try changing your physical environment, get a good night's sleep, visit a toy store with some kids and let them lead you around. Talk with a creative friend in another field. Go to a museum. "If stuck, I either go for a walk or talk out loud or I work at my white-board or sketch pad to think 'on paper'," a top manager at Intel manager told me on a recent assignment. "And if I'm still stuck, I'll switch to another task and allow the first one to go in the background for a while."
5. Realize that waiting for the panic induced by a deadline to jumpstart your creativity (we've all done this at one time or another) is not only over-used, it's often faulty. Harvard professor Teresa Amibole studied the forces and factors that ignite or inhibit unfettered thinking, based on workers and managers self reporting of their experience in daily journals. After reviewing 12,000 aggregate days of diary entries, Amibole found that people often thought they were most creative when they were working under severe deadline pressure. But their diaries showed they were actually *least creative* when fighting the clock! "Time pressure stifles creativity because people can't deeply engage with the problem," Amibole told Fast Company. "People need time to soak in a problem and let the ideas bubble up."
6. Keep an idea notebook. Use it to record not only your ideas, big and small, but the ideas of others, nice quotes, startling statistics, even lines of poetry or interesting expressions in my reading. Watching

Tom Friedman pitch his new book on “Meet the Press” I instinctively grabbed my notebook to record key phrasings, and in doing so, burn them into memory for sharing with others. Example: Friedman spoke about the bountiful opportunities in “ET” – energy technologies.

Recent Media Interview
Featuring
Robert B. Tucker

by Andrew Eder of
The News Journal

[Interview](#)

Effective Idea Selection is Critical to Systematic Innovation

“The key is to pick things that you think are really important and then focus on them like a laser.”

-- Jeff Bezos

Founder and Chairman, Amazon.com

“There is no such thing
in anyone's life as an
unimportant day.”

– Alexander Woollcott

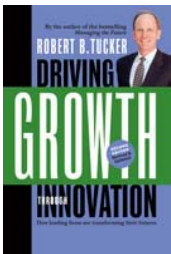
Of all the ways of discovering new ideas, the Walt Disney Company during the Eisner years, had one of the more unconventional methods. Modeled after a 70's television program, Disney's “Gong Show” was a big hit with rank and file employees.

Three times a year, Eisner and two of his top lieutenants would devote a day to listening to anybody and everybody – secretaries, set designers, theme park employees --who wanted to pitch an idea. As many as 40 people were allowed to perform, present or mime their idea until a loud gong would signal that time was up. Then, after all the ideas were aired, Eisner and his managers would discuss each one and render a decision.

A bit unorthodox, yes, but it worked amazingly well. According to Peter Schneider, president of Disney features at the time, most of Disney's animated movies originated from these sessions, as did the idea for Disney's retail stores. [[Schneider interview](#)]

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Most organizations don't invite ideas with nearly this much flair. Nor do they give instant feedback or render quick yes/no decisions. “In most companies there is no obvious strategy for selecting or even evaluating ideas,” concludes the American Management Association's survey of 1,356 global managers. Nearly half (48%) of respondents reported that their firms “don't have a standard policy for evaluating ideas.” The next most common response? About 17% said they use an “independent review and evaluation process,” while 15% said “ideas were evaluated by the unit manager where the idea was proposed.”

An effective selection process connects your “idea funnel” to your “idea pipeline.” Without it, this winnowing is haphazard, hierarchical, and discouraging to would-be innovators.

Advantages of a Robust Selection Process

In working with firms just beginning their innovation journey, I often hear managers say they have “too many ideas, not too few.” How can you have too many good ideas, I'll ask. Upon further discussion, what often becomes clear is that they have too many *half-baked incremental ideas* lying around going nowhere fast. “We never seem to kill an idea,” is a comment I often



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hear. What this indicates is that there is no mechanism in place, no review board or committee, to sift, sort, reject, encourage, prioritize and ultimately “green light” ideas forward. As Yogi Berra would say, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll probably wind up someplace else.”

It takes 80 to 100 raw ideas to come across one or two that are promising enough to pursue. So the task of the selection team is to identify the one or two -- but to do so without demoralizing those whose ideas are not accepted. The selection team serves not just as a judging body, but as a teaching vehicle as well. At Disney, regular contributors overcame shyness and fears of rejection to stand before the chief and sell their ideas. Why? Because they knew they’d get a fair, albeit brief, hearing and at the very least, some honest feedback on why their idea wasn’t selected.

When employees see that their ideas will receive a fair hearing, they start coming up with more of them. At Google, Marissa Mayer and a core team of managers meets several times a week to listen to an unending stream of new idea pitches. Googlers have up to five minutes to propose the next G-Mail, Froogle, Search or Google Earth. If shy, they can submit through the company’s intranet idea management system. When it comes to selection, no one size fits all. Your method just needs to fit with your culture, and create transparency for would-be intrapraneurs.

Establishing Criteria is Critical

Most companies never get around to spelling out the kinds of ideas they are looking for – thus their criteria is unclear. Without criteria, every idea is of equal value, which leads to bottlenecks and battles over scarce resources, and inertia. “People never let go of their pet ideas around this company,” is another comment I often hear.

Well conceived criteria, on the other hand, can be used to get people thinking bigger, to stretch them. GE’s CEO Jeff Immelt requires each division to produce three Imagination Breakthroughs per year – game-changing ideas that will create whole new business models, or product lines with \$100 million in top line revenue within three years.

Selection criteria are best when simple and memorable; they are most valuable when widely understood throughout the organization. At WL Gore & Associates, the criteria have been reduced to three words: Real, Win, Worth. Is the opportunity real? Can we win with it in the marketplace? Is it worth pursuing?

At Bank of America, selection teams in each business unit evaluate ideas using a well-publicized score card. Using a simple zero to five score, ideas get evaluated on such dimensions as: ease of implementation, associate impact, customer delight, and of course revenue potential. At one technology company, the criteria came down to five questions:

1. Does this idea fit our innovation strategy?
 2. Does it create new value for our clients?
 3. Is there a demand for this innovation?
 4. Will management support it?
 5. Can the solution be qualified?
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Getting the Right People on the Selection Team

Unfortunately, selection teams often end up being staffed by persons who have little or no contact with customers and market needs, and who have scant understanding of innovation.

Setting out smart criteria is essential, but those applying the criteria to actual ideas must realize the limits of criteria as well, especially for radical innovation ideas. For example, if the criteria questions whether there is “demand for this new product/service” it might be easy to say no. But game-changing innovations – the cell phone, the Post-it Note, the Internet -- always create demand. And customers don’t know what they want until they see it and use it. So while selection criteria are critical, so too is having the right people on your selection/ review team to make intuitive judgments.

The selection team’s demeanor must not discourage the flow of new ideas, but should encourage more participation. Team members must be perceived as unbiased, entrepreneurial (in touch with markets and customer needs), and adept at building ideas themselves rather than merely sitting in judgment. Selection meetings should be interactive sessions where the focus is on the questions and the unknowns as much as the answers, on the level of passion and commitment as much as the level of experience of the individual suggesting the idea.

At a large global bank I worked with in the early part of this decade, we set up Magnet Teams in each country where the bank operated to do idea selection and oversee compliance and risk management issues. At one point, we began to hear complaints that these teams were acting more like policemen than coaches who were helping you to play by the rules, but who also wanted you to succeed.

Putting a selection process in place won’t guarantee you’ll find breakthrough ideas, but it will reduce idea gridlock and allow you to, as Jeff Bezos says, “pick things that are really important and then focus on them like a laser.” No wonder idea selection is fast becoming an established and essential best practice of firms seeking to imbed innovation into their cultures.

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