

PRINCIPA ALLIANCE – *People Working Together to Build a Better Business*

LEADERSHIP

Ideas Are the Lifeblood of Your Business

Are You an Idea Killer or an Advocate?

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Every great business was once an idea in someone's mind. Of course, that's not all there is to it, but it's the idea that is at the source. And it's the continual stream of ideas that keep a business vibrant and give it a sustainable competitive advantage.

However, too often you'll hear people say, "I don't know what else we could do to improve this business" or "We have tried lots of things and we've found that what we do now is the only way for this business to operate properly."

It seems that people are always saying that they have run out of ideas, and when you look at the performance of most businesses you'd have to agree that there's little evidence of anything new happening.

And yet when people are exposed to new ideas they are more likely to reject them than to consider them.

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Edward DeBono, a world authority on creative thinking, points out that our whole thinking system has been designed to establish and prove the truth of existing ideas rather than to change them.

The danger of logic, he says, is that it allows us to justify our current ideas and in so doing prevents us from implementing new ones. Creativity, on the other hand, requires us to step outside our current paradigm and to apply a lateral approach to the thinking process.

It is not our purpose here to discuss in detail why people seem to be so reluctant to entertain and implement new ideas. But, one reason is the yes/no system we use for evaluating them. We tend to look at new ideas in the context of what we now do and rapidly come to a yes/no conclusion.

To the extent that a new idea means we have to change our thinking, our natural inclination is to reject it because change is hard, possibly risky and implies that what we've been doing is wrong. In other words, we are too lazy to further explore a new idea and see where it leads and we are too emotionally tied to our past.

DeBono categorizes the ages of people and their natural tendency towards creative thought. He suggests that:

0 – 5 Years = The Age of WHY?	5 – 10 Years = The Age of WHY NOT?	10 – 75 Years = The Age of BECAUSE
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He says that children in the age of “why” are still gathering information about the world and things around them. The age of 5 to 10 is the only creative time in the lives of most people because it is then that they are constantly asking “why not” questions as they free-think their way through wonderful concepts and possibilities. Thereafter, people have been subject to an education system that forces an established way of looking at things and, more importantly, evaluating them as being right or wrong within that framework. Business leaders are well and truly in “the age of because” group.

Armed with a right-or-wrong mindset, people have developed and refined a number of idea-destroying tactics that are listed below. See if you can relate to them from your own experience and contemplate whether you may have even used them to dismiss suggestions that have been put to you.

Tactics of an Idea Killer:

1. Point out all the reasons it won't work, this will ensure that the reasons it might work will not need to be addressed.
2. Say you'll look into an idea, and then just sit on it.
3. Laugh hysterically and ignore the suggestion. You'll find that this tactic will effectively prevent you from again being subjected to ideas.
4. Remind the proponent that his last idea was a total failure or, on a similar theme, remind him what happened to the last person who came up with a failed idea.
5. Tell the proponent that she doesn't understand the *broader* issues. That will remind her that good ideas only come from people at the top.
6. Ask for a report containing a detailed analysis that you know the proponent is not capable of doing or will require a lot of time, and at the same time give the proponent five other tasks to perform so that further analysis of the

idea gets pushed to the bottom of the list of priorities.

7. Change the subject (i.e. ask the proponent how his current project is going). That will be a reminder that team members are paid to work not to think.
8. Attack any holes in the suggestion – that's a great way to make someone feel stupid for even raising it.
9. Ask for all the details to be outlined immediately. That usually makes the proponent realize that the idea has not been thought through fully, and sloppy thinking will not be tolerated.
10. Say we have already thought of that. That will remind the proponent that he is no smarter than people who have been there for some time and that as a newcomer he is not yet qualified to make suggestions.
11. Say that we have already agreed to go with some other idea. The presumption being that the “new” suggestion is not acceptable, and the consequence is that once a decision has been made, change will not be entertained.
12. Say we've tried that before. The implication here is that the idea did not work and that the proponent would have been better off not to raise it.
13. Say we've done it this way for 50 years and there's no reason to change now.

Are you guilty of applying some or all of the above idea killers?

The question that everyone running a business needs to ask themselves is how open am I to considering ways to improve what my business does. And related to that, what do I do to proactively encourage people within my organization to challenge the status quo and continually seek to improve processes?

Ideas do not need to be huge to have a big impact.

It's better to be 1% better at 1,000 things than 1,000% better at one thing.

It's the little things that make a difference and which get noticed.

There are very few *big* things a business can do to make it a success. But there are lots of little things. And that's why experimentation and innovation are so critical to high performance. Small ideas are often overlooked precisely because they are small ideas and people do not think they warrant doing anything about.

For example, the ramp workers at United Airlines were not connecting power cables to planes parked at the terminal gate because they could not reach the power socket on the belly of the aircraft. To maintain cabin air-conditioning and flight deck systems, pilots left the engines idling for power generation. When management got together with pilots and ramp workers to discuss the problem, the solution was simple—get taller ladders, the ones they had were too short. This simple, low-cost solution saves United \$20 million every year!

There is an opportunity for improvement in virtually every business process. But in most businesses there are several problems that prevent improvement: people who are close to the improvement opportunity have no channel to communicate their suggestions; they don't know how to make a suggestion; suggestions are killed on the run through the use of one or more of the idea killers mentioned earlier and/or there is no formal system for getting ideas to action so that people can see the results of their ideas.

Suggestions for making the most of your team's suggestions

Take leadership and make communication about innovation a priority

- Challenge your people to look for improvements in everything they do every day and talk about this at every opportunity.
- Make sure you don't behave like an idea killer and mandate that idea killers are not wanted in your organization.
- Acknowledge that by putting an idea out there a person will be vulnerable to criticism, but this is healthy. Feeling vulnerable is a normal human response (refer to the previous comments about our thinking system). Ensure that people understand that the primary purpose of encouraging new ideas is to force the organization to challenge its own assumptions about the way it operates and to be a catalyst for improvement through change.
- Talk to *all* employees in your organization and encourage your managers to do the same. In the halls, the restrooms, the mail room, over lunch. Wherever. (Practice Management by Walking Around—MBWA.)
- Institute an “open mind” policy between management and team members where employees are actively encouraged to raise concerns and suggest ideas for improvement.
- Purge from your organization any form of “can't do” talk and replace it with “can do, will do, help-me-do” language.
- At every opportunity, work alongside your team and ask them why they do things the way they do and what they might do differently to improve the process they own. This will inspire communication and trust and who knows—you may just come across the idea of all ideas.

Formalize opportunities to present ideas

- Have a monthly meeting where employees who wish to attend are asked to bring an idea or challenge for discussion.
- Incorporate a feedback or ideas-exchange session in a regular team meeting.

- Discuss the tactics of an idea killer at every meeting and allow people to refer to it if the discussion turns negative.
- When evaluating ideas, ask the person who does not like an idea to take 5 minutes to argue the case for it while the person who likes the idea is required to take the negative position – you will be amazed at the outcome.
- Create a suggestion box or a forum on your intranet where employees can quickly and easily jot down an idea. Provide a template for them to do that so that there is structure in the process. Have a means to acknowledge the idea, e.g. a digital stamp saying, “This has been read by [CEO]”– and make sure you do read it!
- Create a GIG (Great Idea Group). Populate it with cross-functional representatives from your organization. This group will scope out, evaluate and recommend ideas to improve every aspect of the business that is “critical-to-quality.” Make sure you have a formal and structured system to direct these initiatives and that incorporates measurement, analysis, improvement and subsequent monitoring. This will require an investment in training.
- On regular employee feedback forms make provision for an ideas section and ensure there is a box that the employee can check that says, “I want someone to talk to me about that.” This is a critical link in any feedback system and gives the team member the comfort that his or her ideas are being noticed.

Reward ideas

- Provide positive feedback for all ideas. Even if it is an idea that won’t work, be sure to say thanks to reinforce a culture of innovation and idea sharing.
- Consider offering time off, some financial reward or an extra benefit (i.e. premier parking space, breakfast or movie tickets).
- Incorporate recognition of good ideas in meetings. This could be just verbal recognition or could be a coveted trophy that employees keep on their desk until the next meeting.

- Build idea generation and implementation into your team’s performance evaluation criteria, particularly at management level.

Implement, implement, IMPLEMENT!

- Failing to implement ideas is the fastest way to kill innovation and your team’s motivation. Brainstorming and problem solving are a complete waste of time and energy if no action is taken. No one wants to spin his/her wheels only to sink deeper in the ditch. And, as co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, Bob Waterman, says:

“For many managers, strategy has meant either coming up with a brilliant idea or slamming the competition... The companies I researched do look for a sustainable competitive advantage... They get that from the way they organize, not from the brilliant idea. Because they persist where others give up, they accomplish the most difficult part of strategy... implementation, that is, getting what is often a simple idea done and getting it done right.”

Robert H. Waterman
What America Does Right
 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994)

A Critically Important Closing Comment

Creating an environment in which team members’ ideas are encouraged and listened to is not a chant for unconditional empowerment. At the end of the day, critical decisions must be made by the CEO or by people who have been delegated to make the call. People must understand that. Otherwise the organization will degenerate into anarchy where everyone is running around doing his or her own thing. This is the really difficult part. Mastering the fine line between control and empowerment is probably the most difficult aspect of leadership and management. Remember that clearly defined processes, responses and systems for approving and implementing ideas reduce the risk of anarchy and alleviate tensions.

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