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Weird Ideas That Work **11 1/2 Practices for Promoting, Managing, and** **Sustaining Innovation**

by Robert I. Sutton

A summary of the original text.

Creativity, new ideas, and innovation are keys to success in any age, but in today's whirlwind economy, they are essential for survival itself. Yet, as Robert Sutton explains in *Weird Ideas That Work*, the standard rules of business behavior and management are precisely the opposite of what it takes to build an innovative company.

We are told to hire people who fit in, train them extensively, and work to instill a corporate culture in every employee. In fact, in order to foster creativity we *should* hire misfits, goad them to fight, and pay them to defy convention and undermine the prevailing culture.

Weird Ideas That Work codifies these and other proven counterintuitive ideas to help you turn even the most safe and conventional workplace into one that is wildly creative. The book has won unanimous praise from the leading experts on innovation:

- According to John Seely Brown, the former director of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, once you've

heard Sutton's ideas, "the only thing that will look really weird is much of current management theory and existing human resource management practices."

- David Kelley, the founder and chairman of IDEO, admits, "When I heard Sutton's weird ideas for the first time, I thought he was really nuts. Then, I started trying some of them around our firm, like hiring people who don't fit in so they'll bring new ideas. . . Many of Sutton's weird ideas are now standard practice around here. They help us to be more innovative and come up with better ideas."
- Gary Hamel raves, "Sutton offers first-class advice on how to build a company where innovation is a way of life. If you ignore the essential practices advocated in this lively and well-researched book, you'll do so at your peril."

Sutton is a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University, where he is the Co-Director of the Center

for Work, Technology, and Organization. He is also an authority on innovation, a popular speaker, and co-author of *The Knowing-Doing Gap*, one of the great books Audio-Tech summarized in 2001.

This summary illustrates how some of the best teams and companies use Sutton's counter-intuitive practices to crank out new ideas. More importantly, it explains how *your* company can increase its sales and profits by using these creative approaches.



To build a company where innovation is a way of life, you must discard your deeply ingrained beliefs about business. You need to pursue ideas that may seem "weird," or counterintuitive.

After all, practices that are well-suited for cashing in on old, proven ways can make innovation impossible. To thrive and survive in the long term, companies must keep inventing, or at least keep uncovering new ways of thinking and acting.

Stanford professor James March likes to distinguish between *exploiting old ideas* versus *exploring new possibilities*. Exploiting old ideas means relying on past history, well-developed procedures, and proven technologies to do things that generate money right now. Exploiting old ideas happens when McDonald's uses its knowledge to make and sell a Big Mac hamburger exactly the same as it did the last one.

March points out that, in the long run, no company can survive by relying only on established and proven actions. To make money later, you need to explore *new* possibilities. This means you must experiment with new procedures, hire

new kinds of people, and invent and test new technologies. Your company needs new ideas to satisfy customer demands, to enter new markets, and to gain an advantage over competitors, or at least to keep pace.

For example, McDonald's uses some of the cash from all those Big Macs to explore new possibilities, such as innovative menu items and faster ways to cook french fries. The question is *not* whether McDonald's or any other company should do exploration or exploitation. It's like arguing over which you need more, your heart or your brain. Both are necessary for moving forward. The real question is what proportion of your firm's time and money should be spent on which.

The "weird" ideas that we're about to explore spark innovation because each one helps companies do at least one of three things.

- First, they increase the "variance," or variety, in available knowledge.
- Second, the ideas help you to see old things in new ways.
- Third, the ideas allow you to break from the past.

These are the three basic organizing principles for innovative work. They are polar opposites of the principles that are right for exploiting old ideas, which are:

- First, to drive out variance.
- Second, to see things in old ways.
- Third, to replicate the past.

Let's look at each of these three organizing principles of innovative work in more depth.

First there's increasing the variance in available knowledge. Companies where people want to do things in proven ways are wise to drive out variation. For example, airline pilots should not innovate behind the controls of a passenger plane. When innovation is the goal, however, organizations need variation in what people do, think about, and produce. What might be called errors and mutations in a system meant to do old things in old ways are the lifeblood of innovation. People need to constantly find and produce new ideas, which, like mutations in plants and animals, often fail to endure and spread.

Even when companies want new ideas about how to drive out variation in established processes like manufacturing cars and running hotels, they increase variance in the ideas generated, considered, and tested. In fact, one of the reasons why the weird ideas in this summary work is that each of the counterintuitive practices brings a broader range of ideas into a company.

The second organizing principle is seeing the same old thing in new ways. One way to do this is to act as if an experience or an object is brand new, even if you have seen it hundreds of times. Indeed, innovative people and companies have the ability to keep looking at the same thing but keep changing which aspects they think about and which they ignore.

The third and final principle involves breaking from the past. Although it usually entails a high failure rate and a lot of resources, every company needs to keep trying to discard old ways and replace them with new and better ways.



Sutton's weird ideas work because they help increase variance in knowledge, help people see things in new ways, and help companies break from the past.

Here, briefly, are the 11 1/2 ideas that we'll be discussing for the remainder of this summary. Please note that Sutton refers to the second idea as "Idea 1 1/2" because it is an extension of the first one.

1. Hire slow learners of the organizational code.
- 1 1/2. Hire people who make you uncomfortable, even those you dislike.
2. Hire people you probably don't need.
3. Use job interviews to get ideas, not to screen candidates.
4. Encourage people to ignore and defy superiors and peers.
5. Find some happy people and get them to fight.
6. Reward success *and* failure, but punish inaction.
7. Decide to do something that will probably fail, then convince yourself and everyone else that success is certain.
8. Think of some ridiculous or impractical things to do, then plan to do them.
9. Avoid, distract, and bore customers, critics, and anyone else who just wants to talk exclusively about money.
10. Don't try to learn anything from people who say they have solved the problems you face.

11. Forget the past, especially your company's successes.

WHAT IS CREATIVITY, ANYWAY?

The 11 1/2 ideas in this summary are strange but powerful practices that companies can use to spark and cash in on such creativity. Thus, it is worth dwelling for a moment on a simple yet crucial question: What is creativity?

Creativity is often portrayed as something that cannot be defined, described, or copied. Yet it is actually far less mysterious. Novel products, services, and theories are not conjured out of thin air. Creativity results from using old ideas in new ways, places, or combinations.

Like beauty and other good things, creativity is in the eye of the beholder. An idea that has been around a long time will seem creative to people who encounter it for the first time, as long as they believe it might be valuable. And a new idea can seem creative to some people, but not to others.

If you want to build a team or company that is constantly creative, you need to keep finding new places and ways to use existing ideas and keep persuading others that your ideas are new and valuable. There are three intertwined ways that people, groups, and organizations accomplish these ends.

The first way is by bringing old ideas to people who have never seen them before. People, groups and companies do this over and over again. They keep unearthing old ideas and storing them where they can be easily found. That way, they are always ready to show ideas that have been shelved to people who might find them new and useful.

You don't have to be a world-renowned expert to accomplish

this kind of creativity. You just need to be skilled and motivated at gathering knowledge from diverse sources, and then at figuring out how it might be put to new uses. If you keep doing this, you will develop a reputation from creativity.

The second way to spur creativity is to find new uses for old materials, objects, products, services, or concepts. The process of finding new uses for old things is not always intentional. For example, Pfizer developed Viagra as a treatment for hypertension, but the drug failed. Next, the company tested it as a treatment for angina, and once again the results were disappointing. Finally, Pfizer researchers ran clinical trials of Viagra as a treatment for erectile dysfunction, which led them to discover a new application for this existing drug.

The third way to be creative is to come up with entirely new ideas, products, and services. But it's important to understand that most things that appear to be entirely new are not conjured up out of thin air. Rather, they are new blends of old objects, ideas, or actions. For example, the steam engine was used in mines for roughly 75 years before Robert Fulton put it on a ship and invented the first commercially successful steamboat. The ability to blend existing ideas in new ways is a hallmark of many new product breakthroughs.

In short, an idea is creative when it is new to people who use or evaluate it, and at least some of them believe it could be valuable to themselves or others.



Let's begin by discussing weird idea number one.



1. HIRE SLOW LEARNERS

If you want a wide range of perspectives, ideas, and talents in your company, you should find and hire "slow learners" of the organization's code. A code is a company's taken-for-granted and often unspoken assumptions about why things are supposed to be done in certain ways.

James March has been studying slow learners for over a decade. He has discovered that companies will focus more on exploring new possibilities when a significant percentage of members *don't* follow the code. These people draw on their own knowledge and skill, or invent new ideas or methods to get their work done, which leads to innovation.

This means it is smart to hire slow learners, even though they will come up with many ideas that are "dead ends" or utter failures. The cost is worthwhile because they also generate a larger pool of ideas than you can get from just hiring and breeding fast learners.

If you are looking to hire slow learners, research in psychology suggests that you look for people with at least one of three traits. First, many slow learners are what psychologist Mark Snyder calls "low self-monitors," people who are especially insensitive to subtle hints from others about how to act. Second, many slow learners are shy. They are often happiest when alone, working on their own ideas and lost in their own thoughts. Third, slow learners are likely to have high self-esteem. Much research shows that people with high self-esteem tend to be somewhat less flexible with their behavior. In other words, such people have the confidence to do what they think is right, no matter

what others ask them to do.

One of the most effective ways to deal with slow learners is to surround them with the right kind of fast learners. After all, most good ideas are developed via interactions between people, not by a lone genius. Successful slow learners are often paired with one or more fast learners who can translate and promote their ideas.

Here are nine tips for putting weird idea number one to work:

First, recruit smart people who seem slow to learn how things are "supposed to be done" in their current company.

Second, take a chance on hiring some candidates who are smart, but socially awkward.

Third, hire or breed a few loners and individualists.

Fourth, hire a few people who seem imaginative, but had bad grades.

Fifth, make sure that slow learners are rewarded for expressing their deviant views.

Sixth, protect slow learners from pressures to learn and blindly follow the local culture. Leave them alone for long periods of time.

Seventh, surround slow learners with fast learners who understand how to translate and promote their creative ideas.

Eighth, realize that slow learners often have a hard time communicating their ideas and putting them in context, so their managers often need to do it for them.

Ninth, protect or even isolate slow learners from each other. Their poor communication

skills and arrogance can fuel destructive conflict with each other.



1 1/2. HIRE PEOPLE WHO MAKE YOU UNCOMFORTABLE

The next weird idea is to hire people who make you uncomfortable, even those you dislike.

In some ways, this is really an extension of idea number one. Hiring people who make you uncomfortable, even those you don't like, is another way to find a few useful misfits who will ignore and reject the organizational code. And if you start hiring newcomers who make insiders squirm, chances are that some will be slow learners.

If a company hires only new people whom insiders like and feel comfortable being around, it is probably hiring imitations of those insiders. One of the most persistent findings in the behavioral sciences is that people prefer to spend time with, and have positive feelings about, people who are similar to themselves.

When we have negative emotional reactions to people, it may not have anything to do with whether or not they can do the job. Rather it can be because they have different beliefs, ideas, and knowledge from us. This is not to suggest that you actively seek out rude, insulting or incompetent people for your company. But if you find a candidate who seems competent and has skills your firm needs but has different beliefs, knowledge, and skills than most insiders, negative emotional reactions or evaluations are reasons *in favor of* hiring the person. It will help bring in some new ideas.

Here are 10 guidelines for putting this weird idea to work:

First, stop and ask yourself two questions if you have a negative reaction to a job candidate. Am I having a negative reaction just because the candidate is different? And, if hired, can this person bring in valuable new ideas, see things in new ways, and help the company break from the past?

Second, teach your people the hazards of sameness and the benefits of bringing some different kinds of people into the company.

Third, realize that if you want to hire a candidate because you like her or you feel that she will fit in perfectly, these might be reasons *not* to hire the person if the job requires creativity.

Fourth, if you are young, hire people who are old. If you are old, hire people who are young. The age difference alone can cause discomfort and conflict.

Fifth, if a group isn't creative enough, hire someone with different skills and beliefs about how to do the group's work, assign the newcomer to the group, and tell the group's members that even if they dislike the newcomer, they need him.

Sixth, monitor signs that people are hiring too many others like themselves. For example, if you see managers who consistently hire people from the same schools, that might be a red flag.

Seventh, if someone comes across as likable in an interview, but starts making enemies, try to determine if it is because the person lacks competence or is challenging existing dogma.

Eighth, if you hire people who prompt discomfort in yourself and others, take extra care to listen to their ideas and insist that others do so as well.

Ninth, warn people that they will find it frustrating to work with people who are "different" and teach them to cope with these negative feelings.

Tenth, provide extra protection and support for newcomers who are disliked because they think differently. Their value is lost if they are silenced.



2. HIRE PEOPLE YOU PROBABLY DON'T NEED

Weird idea number two is to hire people you probably don't need. The main reason for hiring such "unnecessary" people now and then is that they bring in ideas that a company lacks. They can bring in "fresh perspectives," a "constructive ignorance," or "disdain for accepted dogma."

Here is a useful rule of thumb: When choosing among experienced and qualified candidates, select those with additional skills that might help the firm in as-yet unknown ways. This can be especially useful for firms that don't have the budget to add extra people to their payroll.

Here are six tips for putting this idea to work:

First, interview candidates who look interesting, but who have skills that seem unrelated to what your company does. Ask them how they can help, because you might be pleasantly surprised.

Second, hire an interesting candidate as a consultant, or temporary employee every now and then to see what happens. This is a relatively low-cost, low-risk way to experiment if you don't know exactly how the person in question can help you.

Third, when you're trying to decide whom to hire from among

people with skills your company *does* need, hire those who have broader training, skills and experience in areas that *appear to be* unrelated to the job.

Fourth, if you believe that a candidate's skills are useless, but others in your company argue otherwise, hire the person, get out of the way, and see if he or she can prove you wrong.

Fifth, take a look at your company's current job titles and descriptions, think about what is missing, and then brainstorm about some off-the-wall skills that just might help your company be more innovative. Then go out and interview some people with those skills.

Sixth, do not view it as a mistake when one of your "oddball" hires doesn't come up with anything useful. Think about it, and talk about it, as a cost of having an innovative company, where success comes from trying a lot of different things.



3. USE JOB INTERVIEWS TO GET IDEAS

Weird idea number three is to use job interviews to get ideas, not just to screen candidates. To use this technique effectively you need to listen to different parts of the answers given by the people that you are interviewing. Devote special attention to the technologies, business practices, and business models they talk about.

This method also entails asking candidates about a broader range of topics than are raised in most interviews. These topics include other companies with which they are interviewing, the companies with which their friends are interviewing, and what their friends are doing at other companies.

Here are six tips for putting this idea to work:

First, have senior people interview entry-level candidates, even if your company is large. It is a quick and cheap way to accomplish technical training, and helps with recruiting too.

Second, prepare for interviews differently. Think about the things you and your company might want to learn from this candidate, regardless of the specifics of the job opening.

Third, ask job candidates how they would use things they've learned elsewhere to solve real problems that your company faces, even problems that don't have anything to do with the job opening the interview is about.

Fourth, make sure that some of the candidates that you interview have skills and experience that seem irrelevant to your company. Ask them how their expertise could be used to solve current or future problems or create new opportunities.

Fifth, listen as much as you can, and talk as little as possible. Don't hold it against the candidate just because it's more fun to hear yourself talk than it is to listen to someone else.

Sixth, set aside some time after a job interview to discuss and record what new ideas were learned and how your company can benefit. Then spread the word to the rest of your company.



To solicit the kind of information that you're looking for when interviewing job candidates, consider using the following sample interview questions:

- **What promising technologies, business practices, and business models did you learn about in school?**
- **What interesting technologies, business practices, and business models are being used in your current company?**
- **Who are the most interesting people you have interviewed with at other companies? Why?**
- **What are the most interesting gossip, rumors, and stories that you have heard during interviews with other companies?**
- **What are some of the most interesting things happening at the companies where your friends or clients work?**
- **What have you learned about our company that might surprise me?**
- **Who are our toughest competitors now? Who are going to be our toughest competitors in the future?**
- **Do you know what our competitors are doing or planning to do?**
- **What do you think are some of the most important trends in our industry? What is hot, what do you see happening in the future, and why?**



4. ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO IGNORE AND DEFY SUPERIORS AND PEERS

The next weird idea is to encourage people to ignore and defy superiors and peers. Some companies also take deliberate steps to create a culture where people don't look to company traditions, bosses, or even other insiders for

guidance about how to do their work.

Such companies have strong cultures, but they are cultures that glorify people who try different things, who see old things in different ways, and who defy and ignore precedent. You want people to draw on their diverse individual experiences, not company history.

To achieve the aim of encouraging people to ignore and defy superiors and peers, hire people from the outside who are given a mandate to defy established ways of doing things. These anointed newcomers may be given the power to ignore, overwhelm, or fire insiders who get in their way, especially when the firm has failed to accomplish something in the newcomers' areas of expertise.

Some companies take the idea of using newcomers to increase the range of ideas and perspectives a step further by having newcomers teach old-timers how to think and act. This technique, which is called "backward" socialization, includes reverse mentoring. Newcomers are assigned to veterans as in any mentoring program, but newcomers do the teaching and veterans do the listening, learning, and imitating.

Also, there is quantitative evidence that innovation increases when managers allow employees to act without getting permission first. Innovation often takes place when senior managers don't bother to stop people who are doing unauthorized work, or even to check into what they are doing.

Here are eight tips for putting this weird idea to work:

First, if a boss disagrees with something an employee is working on, give the employee the chance to prove the boss wrong.

Second, teach managers to tolerate employees who ignore or defy orders to stop work on "pet" projects that might benefit the company.

Third, reward, or at least don't punish, employees who "ask for forgiveness later rather than permission in advance."

Fourth, give recognition and rewards to people who have pursued risky but potentially promising projects that their bosses have tried to stop or were never told about. Provide such recognition and rewards for both successful and unsuccessful projects.

Fifth, encourage, or even require, people to spend 15 percent or so of their time on projects that do not require managerial approval.

Sixth, provide space, time, and resources for employees who want to work on "pet" projects, and don't ask how it is being used.

Seventh, if you discover that people are doing something unauthorized, or even expressly forbidden, figure out if it is something that could benefit the company before stamping it out.

Eighth, realize that sometimes the best way to spark innovation is to get out of the way. Don't ask employees too many questions or give them too much advice. This is especially true when employees have far more knowledge about the work than you.



5. FIND SOME HAPPY PEOPLE AND GET THEM TO FIGHT

Weird idea number five is to find some happy people and get them to fight. A growing body of research suggests that conflict

over ideas is good, especially for groups and organizations that do creative work. Constant argument can mean there is a competition to develop and test as many good ideas as possible, and that there is a wide variation in knowledge and perspectives.

But there is also mounting evidence that groups that avoid *interpersonal* conflict and stick to *intellectual* conflict are more effective, especially at creative work. However, intellectual conflicts are never as free of personal animus, stubbornness, or anger as this distinction implies. Groups that fight over ideas can, all too easily, slip into nasty personal conflict, especially when reputations, careers, and big bucks are riding on the group's performance.

How can your company get the benefits of intellectual conflict while minimizing the risks of interpersonal conflict? A study of conflict in the top management teams of high-technology firms found that the most effective ones consistently used humor; they tell jokes during meetings and pull pranks like decorating the office with plastic flamingos.

Humor is just one of many ways to make people happy. The list of other ways is endless: Give them interesting work, treat them with respect, pay them a lot, give them free food, and so on. Occasional constructive conflict is one thing, but an office filled with grumpy, unhappy, and unproductive people is quite another.

Here are 10 tips for putting this weird idea to work:

1. Avoid conflict of any kind during the earliest stages of the creative process, but encourage people to fight over ideas in the intermediate stages.

2. Encourage people to use tasteful jokes to release tension when arguments over ideas start to become too tense and personal.
3. Teach people how to recognize the differences between interpersonal conflict and intellectual conflict. Use classes and mentoring, and your own actions, to teach everyone the right and wrong way to fight.
4. Find examples of how fighting the right way led to more innovation in your company, and tell stories about these successes.
5. Realize that senior managers need to set the right example by openly arguing about ideas and avoiding nasty interpersonal conflict.
6. Punish or fire people who continually engage in interpersonal conflict.
7. Hire upbeat people and do everything possible to keep them that way. Emotions are contagious, so make sure they interact with others in the company.
8. Teach people through classes, mentoring, and setting a good example, to build resistance to rejection and failure.
9. Hire a few grumpy people, but keep them *away* from other people in the company most of the time because emotions are so contagious. When you need their expertise and critique, bring them out briefly, and then send them back into isolation.
10. Realize that if people are upbeat and optimistic, but can't learn how to fight over ideas, they might be better

off doing routine rather than creative work.



6. REWARD SUCCESS AND FAILURE, BUT PUNISH INACTION

Weird idea number six is to reward success *and* failure, but punish inaction. Rewarding only success discourages people from taking the risks required to import and test new ideas from outside the firm or industry, to find new uses for old ideas, and to try new blends of old knowledge.

If you want people to be innovative, then you must encourage them to spend their time dreaming up, refining, and testing unproven ideas.

Of course, none of this means that your company should reward people who are stupid, lazy or incompetent. Instead, you should reward smart failures, not dumb failures. If you want a creative organization, inaction is the worst kind of failure.

Research on creative output shows that we can't tell which new ideas will succeed and which will fail at the outset, and that creativity is largely a function of sheer quantity. These findings mean that whether or not people are doing *something* is one of the best metrics for assessing people who do creative work, and the evidence indicates that inaction is the worst failure, perhaps the only kind of failure that deserves to be punished if you want to encourage innovation.

Here are nine guidelines for putting this idea to work:

First, promote and hire people who have had intelligent failures, and tell people in the company this is one of the reasons

they have been given important jobs.

Second, monitor and reward failures, and take some time to talk about what was learned.

Third, remember that if people have a low failure rate, you should look for signs that they are not taking enough risks or are hiding their mistakes.

Fourth, forgive and *remember* mistakes, don't forgive and forget.

Fifth, encourage new failures, but don't reward people who keep making the same mistakes over and over again and never seem to learn from them, no matter how openly they talk about their mistakes.

Sixth, make sure that everyone in your organization understands that it is desirable for senior managers and others to talk about their mistakes.

Seventh, use any tool at your disposal to convey that the failure to act is the greatest failure of all.

Eighth, be very wary when people tell you that they don't produce a lot, but when they do, it will be brilliant. Remember that innovation is largely a function of sheer quantity.

Ninth, remember and learn from the mistakes made by other companies and teams, not just your own. It is cheaper and less painful.



7. DECIDE TO DO SOMETHING THAT WILL PROBABLY FAIL

Weird idea number seven is to decide to do something that will probably fail, then convince yourself and everyone else that success is certain.

There is one simple, proven, and powerful thing you can do to increase the odds that a risky project will succeed. Simply *believe* that it will work. More than 500 studies on the "self-fulfilling prophecy" phenomenon show that positive expectations help people to perform better. Negative expectations lead to poor performance. Once you commit to doing something, convince yourself and everyone else that, with determination and persistence, the idea is destined to be a triumph.

Here are five tips for putting this weird idea to work:

First, support a few crackpots, heretics, and dreamers, especially if they are wildly optimistic about their ideas.

Second, once you decide to support a risky project, convince yourself that success is certain. If you can't, replace yourself with someone who is more optimistic.

Third, hire people who are genuinely optimistic about the success of the project or company, and are skilled at instilling such hope in others.

Fourth, remember that optimism does not mean ignoring or denying setbacks. Instead, it means viewing them as temporary events that can teach crucial lessons, which, if followed, ensure success.

Fifth, focus on "pulling the plug" on failed ideas more quickly, not on reducing your failure rate.



8. THINK OF SOME RIDICULOUS OR IMPRACTICAL THINGS TO DO

Weird idea number eight is to think of some ridiculous or impractical things to do, and

then plan to do them. Getting "stupid" can be a mighty smart thing to do if you want to build an innovative company.

Here are eight tips for putting this weird idea to work:

1. Brainstorm a list of absurd things to do, reverse the ideas, and talk about why you should or shouldn't do these things.
2. Brainstorm a list of ridiculous things to do and then develop the best arguments you can about why they are actually *smart* things to do.
3. Remind people about the dangers of taken-for-granted assumptions. Review ideas that were proposed in your company and elsewhere that were once thought to be absurd, but are now commonplace.
4. Imagine several different contradictory versions of the company's future that could happen, given what is known now.
5. Identify the most sensible things that some of your competitors are doing and develop arguments about why your company shouldn't do them.
6. Identify the most absurd things that companies in other industries are doing and develop arguments about why your company ought to do them.
7. Use a devil's advocate and dialectical inquiry: Assign people to challenge your group's assumptions and decisions, and to develop arguments that the opposite assumptions and decisions are actually superior.
8. Never allow even light-

hearted put-downs when people suggest ridiculous or impractical ideas.



9. AVOID, DISTRACT, AND BORE CUSTOMERS AND CRITICS

Weird idea number nine is to avoid, distract, and bore customers, critics, and anyone else who just wants to talk exclusively about money. To innovate, it's sometimes necessary to avoid nosy, opinionated, and intrusive outsiders. Well-meaning managers or investors who insist on close oversight and frequent explanations can unwittingly kill innovation, because people will respond by doing what appears best in the short term, rather than what they believe will be best in the long term.

So, to make innovation happen, skilled managers need to protect and sometimes insulate innovators from outsiders like customers, managers and "money mongers." Thus, here are six intertwined tactics that can be used to keep these intruders at bay:

Tactic One: Simply tell people to go away. (If you have the power and the courage.)

Tactic Two: Simply ignore people. Pretend that they aren't watching you or talking about you.

Tactic Three: Avoid outsiders. And if you can't avoid them, don't talk about your work.

Tactic Four: Distract outsiders with intriguing diversions. This involves raising interesting subjects, or even creating exciting events, that distract outsiders from the innovative work.

Tactic Five: Be vague. Some researchers claim that clarity in organizational communication is

overrated. These researchers point out that ambiguity allows flexibility. Strategic ambiguity is one of the tools that managers can use to protect innovative work. After all, if outsiders aren't clearly told what is going on, they can't offer much more than broad and ill-considered advice, which is easily ignored.

Tactic Six: Be boring. Companies are often subjected to attention because people find them intriguing. It follows that leaders can dim the spotlight by becoming less interesting to others.



10. DON'T TRY TO LEARN ANYTHING FROM PEOPLE WHO SAY THEY HAVE SOLVED THE PROBLEMS YOU FACE

The tenth weird idea is that you should not try to learn anything from people who say they have solved the problems you face. In the creative process, ignorance is bliss, especially in the early stages.

People who don't know how things are "supposed to be" aren't blinded by existing beliefs. They can see things that others have failed to notice, and imagine new ideas and perspectives that would never occur to people who develop deep, but narrow, expertise in an area. Ignorant people don't know what they are supposed to see or ignore, so they can see old things in new ways that so-called experts have rejected or never thought about.

Here are seven tips for putting this weird idea to work:

First, in the early stages of a project, don't study how the task has been approached in the company, industry, or field where you are working.

Second, if you know a lot about

a problem and how it has been solved in the past, ask people who are ignorant of it to study it and help solve it.

Third, ask new hires to solve problems or do tasks that you "know" the answer to or you can't resolve. Get out of the way for a while to see if they can generate some good ideas.

Fourth, find analogous problems in different industries, and study how they are solved.

Fifth, find people working on analogous issues in different companies and industries and ask them how they would solve the problem or do the job.

Sixth, if people who have the right skills keep failing to solve some problem, try assigning some people who have the *wrong* skills to solve it.

Seventh, if you are a novice, seek experts to help you, but don't assume they are right, especially if they tell you they are right.



11. FORGET THE PAST

The eleventh and final weird idea is to forget the past, especially your company's successes.

One reason so many companies rely on obsolete methods and technologies is that people who defend and use them are often more powerful than those who advocate new and superior ways.

Another reason obsolete ways persist is that people become so skilled at doing things in old ways. Their deep competence at old ways and lack of skill at the new can mean that they perform worse when trying new concepts. Stanford professor James March calls this a "success trap."

Companies can use three proven remedies for the "success traps" that prevent people from employing new and innovative strategies.

The first way to break free from an organization's successful past is to start a new company or business unit. Many companies have set up new ventures in ways and places that aren't held hostage by their company's past successes. This is why Wal-Mart.com was formed in Palo Alto, California, rather than at the parent company's headquarters in rural Arkansas. This was done to avoid the cultural and financial conflicts that occurred when Wal-Mart tried to launch an Internet business in the face of the firm's successful traditions in their "bricks and mortar" business.

The second method, which often works well if you can't start a new company or business, is to lead or join a revolution. Management guru Gary Hamel provides guidelines for revolutionaries in his book *Leading the Revolution*, which is available as an Audio-Tech summary. According to Hamel, successful revolutionaries articulate their goals in a clear and exciting way, build a coalition of powerful allies, and closely study the behavior of the old guard they are trying to topple. They also convince former enemies to join them or, failing that, neutralize their power. Finally, they stage small victories to demonstrate that their new ways are superior to old, ingrained ways of thinking and acting.

The third and final way to escape from the success trap is to simply do anything you can to make people in your company aware that ingrained, mindless practices are standing in the way of innovation. One company even bought all of its managers Beanie Babies and told

everyone to throw them at anyone who defended sacred cows. This technique helped the company get rid of some of its more inefficient procedures.

Here are eight tips for putting the weird idea of "forgetting the past" to work:

1. Learn to forget by discarding records of old ways and bringing in people who never knew about the "good old days."
2. Recall the past in your own company and others, but interpret it as a cautionary tale about all the blunders and failures suffered by those who become snared in success traps.
3. Keep fighting over whether established practices are obsolete.
4. Assign people to jobs they don't know how to do.
5. Disband long-standing work groups, especially when people talk to each other too much and are too fond of each other.
6. Use a random process to generate and select decision alternatives rather than the traditional method of analyzing the pros and cons of each alternative.
7. Change the physical setting on a regular basis, including where people work, who they work next to, and what they see.
8. Use the "back-to-the-future" strategy: Get people to do new things by convincing them that they are really returning to older, better ways.



Most managers will agree that weird ideas are needed to drive innovation. Yet, in many companies, the innovative ideas that led to the original success are stamped out by "discipline" and rules that destroy what made the company vibrant in the first place.

Consider what happened to the Lotus Development Corporation in the mid-1980s. The company's first product was Lotus 1-2-3, a business productivity tool. Sales tripled between 1982 and 1984, and Lotus brought in experienced professional managers to oversee its growth.

Yet, while sales of its existing product continued to climb, Lotus failed to develop a stream of new products. To find out why, one of the company's founders, Mitchell Kapor, tried an experiment. He asked the head of organizational training and development to pull together the résumés of the first 40 people to join the company.

Then Kapor asked her to disguise the employees' names and submit their résumés, which listed such previous jobs as community organizer, clinical psychologist, and transcendental meditation teacher, to the employee screening process. Not one of the 40 applicants was called in for an interview.

Kapor viewed this as a sign that Lotus was screening out innovative people and only selecting those who "fit in" with the experienced corporate executives who were now running the company. The only hit product the company developed after 1-2-3 was Lotus Notes, which was created 20 miles from headquarters so the team could escape its narrow culture.

The Lotus experiment shows that every company needs to remember what it takes to spark innovation. Otherwise, it will be filled with people who think alike and act as if the future will be a perfect imitation of the past.



Let's conclude with 10 principles that can help you apply the weird ideas that we've discussed in this summary.

First, **the best management is sometimes no management.** Leading innovation can require a soft touch, or getting out of the way completely.

Second, **innovation means selling, not just inventing new ideas.** Creativity is in the eye of the beholder. No matter how wonderful something new is, it will only be accepted if the right people can be persuaded of its value. Ralph Waldo Emerson was wrong when he said, "If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door." Too many innovations succeed because they are sold better, not because they are objectively superior.

Third, **innovation requires both flexibility and rigidity.** Generating different ideas and seeing old things in new ways can only be accomplished by people who can revise their beliefs easily. Yet, some rigidity is also necessary for developing successful innovations. It helps to define problems narrowly enough so they can be talked about in a constructive way. This allows people to know what to focus attention on and what to ignore. A useful guideline for striking a healthy balance between rigidity and flexibility is to hold either the solution or the problem constant, and to let the other vary.

Fourth, **incite and uncover discomfort.** Discomfort is an inevitable and desirable part of innovation. The weird idea to hire people who make you uncomfortable makes this point directly. Discomfort can also be generated when you hire people you don't need, when employees defy bosses, when people imagine dumb things and try to do

them, and when people argue over their precious ideas. Discomfort isn't much fun, but it helps people avoid and break out of mindless action.

Fifth, **treat everything like a temporary condition.** Exploiting existing knowledge is only wise if what worked in the past will keep working. And bringing in varied ideas only makes sense when, even if old ways still work, they will soon be obsolete. Leaders of innovative companies constantly warn that just because things are working well now does not mean they will work later. In short, sustaining innovation requires treating everything, from procedures and product lines to teams and organizations, as things that might be useful now but will need to be discontinued.

Sixth, **make the process as simple as possible.** This is a hallmark of many innovative companies and teams. They use work practices that help people focus on what matters and ignore the rest. Needless complexity arises when companies consider every contingency and involve anyone who could possibly improve, support, or be opposed to an idea.

Seventh, **innovation means living with some nasty drawbacks.** Working in an innovative place can be annoying and frustrating. The ideas in this summary work, but that doesn't mean you will enjoy hiring people you don't like and who probably won't like you. It doesn't mean you will like being around people who are constantly fighting with you and one another. And if you like an orderly workplace, you won't be happy with the chaos that results when your firm is filled with people who have never been taught what they are supposed to do. None of this is to say that innovative companies are horrible places.

But you should know the hazards of innovation before devoting your days to it.

Eighth, **learn to fail faster**, not less often. You should cringe when people talk about making innovation more efficient. It usually means they want to use the logic of routine work to manage innovative work. Once companies try to "reduce the number of screw-ups," innovation usually grinds to a halt. The key to more efficient innovation is failing faster, not less often.

Ninth, **"open is good," and "closed is bad."** Being open to ideas from other people and places brings in variance and different perspectives, which can

help your company avoid getting stuck in the past. And by being open to outsiders, ideas that are old to them, but new to you, can be borrowed or blended with what you already know to invent new management practices, services, and products.

The tenth and final principle is that **innovation is largely a question of attitude.** In fact, the exact methods used to innovate are often less important than building a company where people have the right attitudes toward their work and each other. Psychologists tell us that emotions are the engine that propels human action. Feelings drive people to turn good ideas and intentions into reality. So people who have the

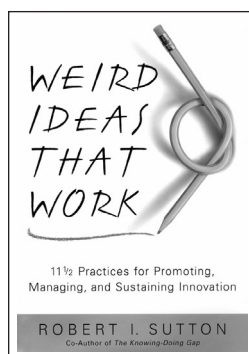
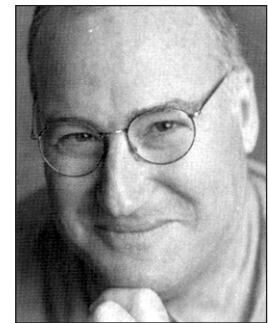
right attitudes will have an easier time implementing the weird ideas here, and their worldview will also drive them to invent and use their own ideas about spurring innovation.



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