

Nurturing good ideas

by Jan van den Ende and Bob Kijkuit

Managers know that simply generating lots of ideas doesn't necessarily produce good ones. What companies need are systems that nurture good ideas and cull bad ones—before they ever reach the decision maker's desk. Our research shows that tapping the input of many people early in the process can help ensure that the best ideas rise to the top.

It's not uncommon for companies' idea-generation activities to produce thousands of ideas. Reviewing all of them to find the best is resource intensive and doesn't guarantee high-quality results. After all, how seriously will reviewers consider idea number

steps to systematically improve the quality of ideas before they're submitted for review. They're encouraging employees to first discuss ideas with their colleagues to gain insights about their technical and market feasibility or how they fit with company objectives,

colleagues and, based on their feedback, made changes in the idea before submitting it. People who tapped colleagues outside their departments were more successful; discussing an idea with them increased its chances of adoption, whereas discussions with colleagues from the same department didn't.

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Interestingly, communication with friends or trusted colleagues appeared to aid adoption, probably because their input tended to be richer and offered more constructive and critical feedback, leading to more substantial changes to the idea itself. What's more, the greater the number of perspectives an employee got, the higher his idea's chances of being adopted were.

532? Probably it will get only superficial attention, and it will be selected for development only if its usefulness is immediately apparent. This screening approach is likely to leave potential blockbuster ideas on the cutting-room floor.

which will either enhance the ideas' value or lead to their early and appropriate demise.

Consider how this works at Unilever, where we followed the development of ideas at the company's food labs in a 14-month study. Employees there usually discussed an idea with

Other firms take a similar tack. At the biotechnology research company KeyGene, management advises employees to discuss ideas with others before submitting them to a review committee. In IBM's ThinkPlace program, “catalysts” create networks

of people around ideas. Employees post ideas on an intranet site; catalysts select promising ones and invite comment or support from people in their network. Eventually, they ask one or more network members, not necessarily the idea originator, to present the concept to a line manager or an internal innovation fund.

This approach to idea development offers a clear payoff in efficiency and in the quality of ideas. But it has another benefit as well: It enhances motivation by improving the odds of success and reducing the chance that an employee will invest unduly in an idea that's likely to fail. ■

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