WEIRD IDEAS THAT WORK

$11^{1/2}$ Practices for Promoting, Managing and Sustaining Innovation

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The most creative companies and teams are usually inefficient and irritating places to work because they follow business practices that are the complete opposite of the way routine businesses operate. Almost all highly creative companies do weird things. They are filled with mavericks who refuse to do things the same way as everyone else. By doing that, creative companies consistently develop new ways to think and act. That willingness to see old things in new ways positions these creative companies to come up with the breakthrough ideas of the future—which are never extensions of the existing but complete departures from the norm.

The 11½ weird ideas for sparking business innovation are:

1. Hire people who are “slow learners” – of the status quo.
2. Hire people who you dislike or feel uncomfortable about.
3. Use job interviews to get ideas, not to screen candidates.
4. Encourage people to ignore and defy their peers and bosses.
5. Identify your “happy” people – and get them fighting.
6. Reward success and failure generously but punish inaction.
7. Undertake an impossible task with a positive attitude.
8. Think of some impractical things and then plan on doing them.
9. Avoid anyone (even customers) if all they talk about is money.
10. Innovate by ignoring what everyone else has done before you.
11. Forget the past, especially your own company’s successes.

To build an organization where innovation flourishes and becomes a way of life, you have to:
• Encourage variance amongst the employees – rather than “toeing the corporate line”.
• Let people see old things in refreshingly new and original ways.
• Break from the past and be willing to release new products that may fail in the marketplace.
• Have a goal of making more money in the future rather than optimizing your organization to make money right now.

And thus, weird ideas are required. It is impossible to build an organization that acts differently to other companies by replicating what they do. To reach a different destination, a different set of rules are needed, and the journey must be judged not by the same criteria conventional companies use but by a new valuation methodology.

In short, when it comes to being creative in business, sometimes a little weirdness will go a long way.
Main Idea
To instill a wide range of perspectives into a business, identify and hire smart people who like to do their own thing and don’t feel pressured to blend in with everyone else. If they do what they think is right rather than what everyone else does, your organization will be better for it.

Supporting Ideas
Creativity flourishes when you bring in newcomers who don’t feel any great need to learn “how things are supposed to get done around here”. In fact, the less time a new hire spends talking with his or her coworkers or bosses, the greater the possibility they will be able to see better ways to get things done.

The best slow learners:
- **Tend to be socially awkward** – preferring to hide in their office and work rather than mingle around the water cooler correlating social calendars.
- **Are relatively unlettered by social conventions** – focusing on what they really think about a situation instead of what they think their boss wants to hear.
- **Tend to be shy by nature** – because they don’t require the approval or adulation of others to make them feel successful.
- **Have high self-esteem** – an enduringly positive evaluation of themselves, their opinions, their capabilities and their inevitable success.
- **Tend to get bad grades at school** – because they are more interested in listening to their internal voices than they ever are in bothering with grades.

To get the best out of a slow learner, surround them with support people who understand how to translate and promote their creative ideas within the organization. These support people will need thick skins, because most slow learners tend to be quirky and intolerant of people who aren’t on their same wavelength. A good support team will understand that, and isolate the slow learner from others. Slow learners also tend to have poor communication skills, so someone who can put new ideas into context will be required.

Key Thoughts

“The best engineers sometimes come in bodies that can’t talk.”
- Nolan Bushnell, founder of Atari

“Most companies automatically search for fast learners, gregarious people with social graces, who are willing and able to bend to the wishes of others. Indeed, for most of what they do, companies need fast learners who will do things as they have always been done. That is how to make money right now. But your company can benefit from slow learners if you want to explore new ways of doing things, if you want to break from the past so you can make money later. Even in the parts of your company that do mostly routine work, hiring a few slow learners can be a worthwhile investment in the future.”
- Robert Sutton

“To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk.”
- Thomas Edison

**Idea #1**
Hire people who are “slow learners” – of the status quo.

Main Idea
If you only hire people you like, all you end up with is more of what your organization already has. The people you really need are those who make you squirm and feel uncomfortable. They have the potential to shake things up.

Supporting Ideas
To get an influx of fresh ideas, hire some new talent with diverse backgrounds. Specifically:
- If you’re young, hire some old people – because that age difference can generate some worthwhile discomfort and conflict.
- Never hire people like yourself – in terms of attending the same schools, living in the same country or regions, having the same hobbies, belonging to the same clubs and so forth.
- Monitor internal discomfort levels – if a likeable new hire starts making enemies internally, that’s generally a good sign they are challenging the status quo. Encourage them to do so.
- Pre-warn your people – since everyone finds it a little frustrating and irritating to work with others who do things a different way. And don’t forget to warn the new hire they will experience some initial uneasiness as well.
- Listen carefully – especially to the ideas of people who make you feel uncomfortable personally.
- Run interference for the new guys – providing them with extra support and protection. Everyone will have a vested interest in seeing the new talent fail or silenced, so plan ahead.

In short, the more diverse your talent pool, the more likely some creative and innovative thinking will take place.

Key Thoughts

“I have this guy who is a left-wing radical that works for me. He makes me feel uncomfortable. He tells me I am wrong. He compensates for my blind spots. I need him desperately.”
- Rey More, senior vice president, Motorola

“Hire people who make you squirm; that’s how you get new ideas.”
- Peter Skillman, director of product design engineering, Handspring

“I was an artist, and I only hired people who were fellow artists. That meant whenever we took on a project, we failed to ask whether that project would make us enough money to build the infrastructure necessary to do longer projects in the future. We really needed people with business skills.”
- Will Vinton, founder, Will Vinton Studios

“I call this weird idea #1 ½ because it's really an extension of idea #1. Hiring people who make you feel uncomfortable, even those you don’t like, is another way to find a few useful misfits who will ignore and reject the organizational code. If the company hires only new people whom insiders like and feel comfortable being around, it is probably hiring imitations of those insiders. The only argument for experimenting with this weird idea is that it works.”
- Robert Sutton

**Idea #1 ½**
Hire people who you dislike or feel uncomfortable about.
Main Idea

If you hire people you don’t need at present but that you think might be useful in the future, some useful creative ideas may be generated. With a little luck, these “unnecessary” people may even have some new ideas that can later be turned into new streams of revenue for the business.

Supporting Ideas

If you interview an interesting person with skills not directly applicable to the business currently at hand, think carefully about hiring them anyway. The assignment doesn’t need to be permanent if that will cause internal problems – bring them in as a contractor, consultant or temporary employee. They will be able to take some risks others in the company wouldn’t even consider attempting.

Creative work is always inherently unpredictable. It’s difficult (and sometimes downright impossible) to forecast in advance what background knowledge and skills will contribute to a breakthrough. People with skills that are seemingly unrelated to the project at hand may be able to contribute some fresh viewpoint that everyone else has overlooked. By hiring smart and interesting people, you add to the opportunities for creativity to work.

To make this work:

- Offset your own personal biases and preferences – by having others in the company argue the merits of whether to hire some of the more interesting people you naturally reject.
- Be prepared for failure – and the fact most of these more unusual new hires won’t come up with anything that is genuinely useful.
- Get out of the new hire’s way – give them an opportunity to stand on their own two feet.
- Look carefully at your current job titles and descriptions – consider what type of off-the-wall skills would complement what’s already happening within the organization, and give some thought to where those skills can be found.
- Look for “packrats” – because many highly creative people collect vast amounts of ideas, people and things that might prove useful one day.

Key Thoughts

“We look for people who are smart and who have the right attitude. Even if we don’t know how we are going to use their skills, we figure they can teach us something we just might need, even if we don’t quite know why yet. And we always assume they can learn new skills. That is why we hired a lawyer last year, even though we didn’t need one. She eventually became head of human resources, although she had no prior experience in that kind of work.”
  – Justin Kitch, founder and CEO, Homestead

“Even if a company never derives any new and valuable ideas from using this tactic, making such hires can help support a culture of innovation. Be wise enough to realize that, because creative work is so inherently unpredictable, you will often misjudge what knowledge will be useful and what will be useless.”
  – Robert Sutton

Main Idea

Instead of having an unstructured chat as a job interview, put potential new people through their paces. Give them something you’re working on as a sample task and see how they perform. They may come up with something fresh and original regardless of whether or not you ultimately decide to hire them.

Supporting Ideas

For most employers, their personal biases strongly influence their decision on whether to hire someone. If the candidate likes similar things, is physically attractive or relates well to the interviewer, they have a higher chance of being employed. Most managers flatter themselves as being very good judges of character on the basis of a job interview, yet many studies have shown the conventional hiring process isn’t effective at identifying who will become the superstars of the future.

With that in mind, try a new approach. Harness the job interview process as a way to spark creativity and innovation. Use interviews to increase the number of ideas floating around inside the company. You do this by asking different questions, like:

- “What are the most promising new technologies or business models you learned about in school?”
- “Who are the most interesting people you have interviewed with at other companies, and what made them interesting?”
- “Looking in from the outside, what have you noticed about our company or our competitors?”
- “What strikes you as being the most important trends in our industry and where do you think things will head in the future?”
- “Have you heard any interesting rumors, gossip or stories while doing the interview rounds?”

With a little forethought, you could even get job candidates working on the real problems you face. Listen to what they have to say. Write down their suggestions. Ask smart questions about topics you need to know, and then shut up. See whether or not the candidate can contribute something meaningful. Most times they will not, but on a few rare occasions, a genuinely good idea may emerge.

Key Thoughts

“I learn a lot from interviewing young graduates from engineering school. They tell me what they are learning about technology in their engineering classes and they have their own crazy ideas I never would have thought of.”
  – Nolan Bushnell, founder, Atari

“A little-known benefit of job interviews is that they can spark creativity and innovation. When done properly, interviews increase the number of ideas floating around the company. This kind of learning happens accidentally in many companies where job candidates (in their efforts to impress interviewers) talk about the technical knowledge they acquired in college or from current and past jobs. When candidates interview at multiple firms, or have friends who are working for an even broader array of companies, they may reveal ‘intelligence’ about what’s going on at competing firms.”
  – Robert Sutton
Main Idea
Most companies try and build a strong culture as a platform for exceptional performance. The only problem with that is it drives out variance and encourages conformity, which in turn stifles creativity. To overcome it, hire some newcomers and let them work whatever way makes sense to them. Give them license to do different things to create an environment where corporate creativity can flourish.

Supporting Ideas
Many corporate histories are full of “submarine” projects – where employees defied their bosses and continued development of new products in their spare time, only surfacing once the product was developed and ready to market. That should send a clear signal to all managers there are circumstances in which employees should be given an opportunity to prove the boss wrong.

To achieve that in practice:
- Encourage every employee to spend at least 15-percent of their time on projects of their own choice – and for which no managerial approval is needed. Some people will abuse the privilege, but others will work on genuinely innovative ideas.
- Provide some resources – for those who chose to work on a “pet” project, and don’t audit how these resources ultimately get used or applied.
- Recognize and reward publicly – those who have pursued risky projects their bosses tried to stop or never heard about. Celebrate success, especially in cases where employees follow the approach of, “It’s easier to ask for forgiveness later rather than permission in advance”.
- Look at the projects people are doing even though forbidden objectively – and see whether or not it is something that might just benefit the company before unilaterally stamping it out.
- Get out of the way of your employees – don’t bug them with too many questions or try and give them advice on how to run their project. Instead, let them follow their hunches and see where it leads.

Key Thoughts
“Sometimes, the best management is no management at all. Jeffrey Pfeffer likes to say that managers should be required to take something like the physician’s oath: ‘First, do no harm’. To breed innovation, sometimes the best thing you can do is relinquish control and give people the chance to prove you wrong.”

– Robert Sutton

“Cultures can have powerful consequences, especially when they are strong. They can enable a group to take rapid and coordinated action against a competitor or for a customer. They can also lead intelligent people to walk, in concert, off a cliff.”

– Professors John Kotter and James Heskett

“Leading innovation can mean doing less rather than more. Hire some smart people, encourage them to ignore and defy you under certain circumstances, get out of their way, and see what happens.”

– Robert Sutton

Main Idea
The richest innovations tend to emerge from a rich environment filled with positive and upbeat people who also know how to fight for what they believe in. Intellectual conflict and argument ensures that whatever emerges is as robust and strong as possible.

Supporting Ideas
When everyone in a group agrees, not much creative thinking is occurring. Open conflict is a sign there is a healthy contest for the best ideas to be put forward. Otherwise, everyone is in danger of simply becoming a resident chorus of approval for whatever the boss wants to do.

Of course, there is a right and a wrong way to stage healthy fights. The wrong way is where people take things personally, or where an idea gets rejected before it has been developed well enough to be evaluated. By contrast, to allow a good creative fight to develop:
- Teach people to use tasteful and appropriate jokes – to ease tensions, especially when things get a little too tense.
- Encourage people to withhold judgement of brand new ideas – at least until they have been fleshed out in more detail.
- Use classes and mentoring setups – to teach people how to express and evaluate new ideas rationally.
- Enshrine some success stories in your own hall of fame – of people who fought for what they believed in and triumphed against the odds.
- Encourage the use of humor – to constructively introduce new ideas that are highly original and offbeat.
- Do whatever is required to put your people into a good mood.
- Always have a few grumpy people available somewhere in the organization – since they will be able to find things that are wrong when enthusiasm for an idea causes a group to ignore some of the basic realities.

Key Thoughts
“It is not enough to allow dissent. We must demand it.”

– Robert F. Kennedy

“Multiple disciplines in the same studio, fights over what radio station to listen to, divergent opinions over appropriate work hours, modes of dress, codes of behavior, even what was perceived as quality work...all of this I saw as a rich and yeasty environment for the kinds of friction I wanted to turn into light rather than heat. The uneasiness in my stomach and the fireworks in my brain told me there was some vital connection between the abrasiveness itself and original thinking.”

– Jerry Hirshberg, founder and president, Nissan Design International

“I don’t want any yes-men around me. I want everyone to tell me the truth – even though it costs him his job.”

– Samuel Goldwyn

“If you want innovation, you need happy warriors, upbeat people who know the right way to fight. A growing body of research suggests that conflict over ideas is good.”

– Robert Sutton
Main Idea
If you genuinely want to encourage people to keep coming up with new creative ideas instead of reverting to the tried and true, simply rewarding success isn’t enough. You also have to reward the failures because it’s in the dead ends where the best new lessons are found.

Supporting Ideas
Anytime an organization attempts to eliminate flops it also eliminates innovation, because the only way you can do that is to stick to the tried and true. Creative ideas always lie just the other side of failure. In fact, the best way to get there is to find ways to fail faster while learning as much as possible along the way.

In practical terms, a highly creative organization will:

- **Talk about and celebrate intelligent failures**—while taking the time to pause and note what was learned from each.
- **Promote people who have some significant failures to their name**—since that is a good sign these are people who are willing to push the edge of the envelope and take some risks.
- **Only be prepared to punish people if they make the same mistake over and over again**—since the objective is to learn from mistakes rather than attempt to live them again and again.
- **Convey the message that failure to act is a greater sin than attempting to do something new and coming short.**
- **Go out of its way to try and learn from the failures of other companies and teams**—since that will be much cheaper and less painful than going through a failure firsthand.
- **Be wary of people who are not prepared to fail**—since most likely those people will refuse to act when they should be trying new things to see what works.
- **Forgive rather than forget mistakes**—but concentrate instead on extracting all the lessons that are available from each.
- **Make a high failure rate an essential for getting promoted.**

Key Thoughts

“If you want to succeed, double your failure rate.”
- Thomas Watson Sr., founder and CEO, IBM

“Many people dream of success. To me success can only be achieved through repeated failure and introspection. In fact, success represents the one percent of your work which results from the 99-percent that is called failure.”
- Soichiro Honda, founder, Honda Motor Company

“In short, if you want innovation in your company, you need to reward people for taking intelligent action, not just for talking about the virtues of failure, experimentation, or risk taking. It might not even be enough to give equal rewards for success and intelligent failures. The excessive value that our culture places on success means that people who succeed may still get more kudos than they deserve from peers and outsiders, and those who fail may get more blame than they deserve. To offset this bias, perhaps this weird idea should be, ‘Reward failure even more than success, and punish inaction.’”
- Robert Sutton

Idea #6
Reward success and failure equally generously but punish inaction.

Idea #7
Undertake an impossible task with a positive attitude.

Main Idea
People are genuinely bad at forecasting what will and won’t work. Therefore, innovate by backing risky projects, even those that are doomed to obviously fail. And if you can convince everyone success is certain and just around the corner, you may be surprised at just what does eventuate.

Supporting Ideas
History is full of innovations everyone dismissed as impossible—powered flight, television, satellites, photocopying, fax machines, Post-it Notes and even the shape of the earth. The merits of these products are easy to see in hindsight but equally easy to reject in their early stages. Thus, it really is impossible to tell which risky projects will succeed and which will fail. The only viable action an organization can take to increase the opportunities for success is to approach each project with a positive attitude.

The simple act of believing something will succeed and convincing others to share that same belief:

- **Inspires confidence**—which will generate a higher level of performance on the part of everyone involved.
- **Encourages people to work harder and longer**—in anticipation of a breakthrough.
- **Makes people forget the “experts” or “critics”**—since what others say is of little relevance to the success or failure of the project overall.
- **Allows everyone involved to view setbacks as temporary events rather than definitive outcomes.**

There is one other action business leaders can take to increase their chances of success. Instead of trying to reduce their failure rate, they should focus on “pulling the plug” on failed ideas more quickly. That will allow time and resources to be used in testing still more ideas to see what works.

Key Thoughts

“Leaders who want innovation face a nasty dilemma. They can tell people whom they have selected to work on a risky project that it will probably fail, which will help ensure failure and lead to negative consequences for both the company and the person. Or they can deceive people who work on these projects (and themselves) into believing that success is nearly certain, which reduces the (albeit still high) odds of failure but increases the sunk costs involved in each project. I am not advocating that leaders ought to routinely lie to people to spark more creativity. While lying is a sleazy thing to do, the fact remains that all creative work entails risky projects. If deception helps reduce that risk, a case can be made that it is the right thing to do at times. Indeed, dilemmas like these have caused ethicists and philosophers to assert that deception is sometimes more ethical than telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but truth.”
- Robert Sutton

“Trust yourself and speak out what you believe. If what you believe is different, dare to be different. Dare to be in a hurry to change things for the better.”
- Geoffrey Ballard, founder of Ballard Power Systems and co-inventor of fuel cells for powering buses and automobiles
Main Idea
Some of the most creative breakthroughs in history have come when people have gone out and done dumb, impractical or ridiculous things. The direct action of reversing or challenging assumptions which get taken for granted can lead to some highly impressive breakthroughs which only become obvious in retrospect.

Supporting Ideas
To be creative, a person needs to think differently first and foremost. As usual, that’s easy to describe but more difficult to put into practice. Some novel ways to stimulate creative thinking are:

- **Identify the most absurd things companies in other industries are doing**—and come up with arguments why your firm should do something similar.
- **Look at the most successful actions of your competitors**—and develop arguments on why you should do something completely the opposite.
- **Come up with a list of the most ridiculous things your business could do**—and then develop convincing arguments why those would actually be smart things to do.
- **Develop several completely contrasting versions of your company’s future**—and analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- **Outlaw ridicule and put-downs whenever new ideas are put forward**—even if those ideas seem totally ridiculous or impractical at first.
- **Have your business team sit down and design “the worst product we could possibly build”**.

By talking about products, services, business models and business practices that seem dumb, a company makes explicit what could be done. There is also an opportunity to come up with innovations others won’t copy, or at least won’t copy until they too challenge their own assumptions. And, with any luck, a great innovation may lie undiscovered just below the surface of popular opinion. This has happened so many times in the past it is inconceivable it will not happen again in the future.

Key Thoughts

“The ideas that people think are the stupidest are the most protective. I think this is especially true with new business models. People are especially likely to say they are stupid and to be afraid to copy them.”

— Bill Gross, founder and CEO, Idealab!

“Getting stupid can be a mighty smart thing to do if you want to build an innovative company. Thinking up the dumbest, most ridiculous, and most impractical things you can do is a powerful way to explore your assumptions about the world. It helps elicit what you know and believe but may have a hard time articulating, perhaps because it is so obvious you don’t even notice it. It also helps you imagine what might happen if your dearest beliefs turn out to be dead wrong. And thinking up the most ridiculous things – and then thinking about why you might do them – creates a broader palette of options.”

— Robert Sutton

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Main Idea
The more time that can be allocated to thinking creatively, the better. That means a balance is needed – be open and invite the attention of outsiders in the early stages of a project, but avoid distractions like having to talk to the people who provide the money at other times.

Supporting Ideas
As a rule-of-thumb, avoid outsiders whenever your team is:

- Trying to learn how to do something new.
- Attempting to visualize some highly original new product.
- Developing a prototype and trying to get it working.

At these critical junctions, you should avoid talking to:

1. **Clients or customers**—because they are always drawn to what is familiar and repelled by what is unknown.
2. **Managers**—because they will spend more time figuring out how to package a new technology impressively for top management than on improving it.
3. **Money managers**—because all they will think about is how little the product can be manufactured for and what it will fetch when marketed properly.

Thus, to avoid the unwanted attention of these types of people at the wrong time, you can try these tactics:

- **Bluntly tell them to go away**—because of the intense demands on your time.
- **Learn how to ignore the critics**—and focus instead on the creative task at hand.
- **Physically avoid outsiders**—and work in isolation and secrecy, like Lockheed’s famous skunk works.
- **Distract them**—by launching off onto intriguing diversions and interesting lines of thought.
- **Be vague**—using strategic ambiguity to cloak what’s really happening in some purposeful mumbo jumbo.
- **Be so boring they only speak to you once**—because if you’re dull, you’re hardly going to be very newsworthy.

And finally, keep in mind that not everything needs to be done in isolation. There will also be times when the attention of outsiders will not only be welcome but of vital importance. For example, use outsiders whenever you are:

- Using familiar, ingrained work practices.
- Looking for knowledge from other specialist fields.
- Looking for more resources to complete a project.
- Stuck on some problem.
- Improving a product already in widespread use.
- Developing a niche product.
- Selling a finished idea.

Key Thoughts

“The real lesson is that you have to choose which customers to listen to very carefully. And even then, you can’t necessarily give them what they want. You have to develop products that your customers will need by the time you are able to deliver them. If you don’t, when the development cycle is finished, and you’re ready to ship, you will be offering what the customer said they wanted last year.”

— Bob Metcalf, founder of 3Com
Main Idea
Don’t begin a business project by checking what others have already done in that area. That limits your thinking. Instead, concentrate on doing what seems logical and right. Plunge right into it by looking at how similar problems are solved in other industries and see whether there are some crossover ideas.

Supporting Ideas
In many ways, the more naive you are, the better your chances of making a genuine breakthrough. Therefore, the most creative work will always be done by people who don’t know the accepted way of doing things – which means new hires fresh out of school, people from outside the industry or even people from a foreign country.

To take this idea further:
- *Hire people with formal training in different industries* – and see whether they can come up with an entirely original way to approach problems in your own industry.
- *Find people with diverse backgrounds* – different sets of technical skills, opinions and experience.
- *Look for people who are bright, creative and willing to try things others wouldn’t even give a second thought to.*
- *Dare to be different*– hire people who have the “wrong skills” for a project and see whether they can solve a problem the people with the generally accepted set of skills fail at.

Key Thoughts
"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 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."

– Robert Sutton

"We were fortunate because we were amateurs when it came to games and we naively went about doing what we thought would be sure to work. We were not preoccupied with established industry practices – we started from square one and let the ideas flow freely and without reservation."

– Shigio Maruyama, vice chairman, Sony Computer Entertainment Inc., developers of the Sony Playstation

“Knowledge about effective ways of doing things can stifle creativity. Sometimes being ignorant, but curious, playful and persistent, is better than knowing the way things are supposed to be done and the way others would have done them. The rule of thumb is that if you know a lot about a subject, seek advice from people who are naive, either because they lack bias or because they are experts with biases that are drastically different from people in your industry or company. And, of course, if you are ignorant about a subject, find someone who is knowledgeable.”

– Robert Sutton

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Main Idea
Forget what your company has done in the past. Instead, study the spectacular success stories of the business world. Draw your inspiration from the possibilities that abound rather than being linked to how your organization “did things in the good old days”.

Supporting Ideas
It’s easy to become reliant on obsolete methods and technologies through sheer force of habit, or on the strength of past glories in the marketplace. Some commentators describe this as a “success trap” – where core competencies turn into core rigidities that stifle innovation.

To avoid these success traps:
- *Start a new company* – and staff it with new hires.
- *Set-up a new business unit* – and encourage it to ignore, defy and rebel against every part of the prevailing culture. Let existing employees move to the new unit only on the basis they need to be committed and will not be able to go back to their old jobs if things don’t work out at the new unit.
- *Lead or join a business revolution* – internal insurrections that throw out the outdated ways of doing business and replace them with new and improved business models, practices or technologies.
- *Run some change-oriented workshops, training meetings or task forces* – with the express objective of making some dramatic internal changes.
- *Encourage people to become agnostic towards the business* – adopting whatever works best instead of being tied to what was useful in the past.
- *Hire people who are prepared to stand up and generate a little internal conflict.*
- *Routinely take people out of their current jobs and give them new assignments that make them feel uncomfortable.*
- *Constantly disband and reform work teams* – to stop people becoming jaded and complacent.
- *Introduce some deliberately random decisions* – and see whether any better alternatives emerge from the background noise.
- *Utilize a “back-to-the-future” approach* – deliberately ask employees to return to a bygone era and do the things that worked well in the past. In doing so, either the old problems which everyone had forgotten will come again into clearer focus or the company might rediscover what made it great in the first place.

Key Thoughts
“George Santayana’s famous words that ‘those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’ is bad advice if you want constant innovation. At least it is bad advice when it comes to memories of what your company has done in the past. People and organizations do learn from studying others’ successes and failures. For organizational life, Santayana’s saying would be more accurate if it were something like: ‘Those who can remember their company’s past are condemned to repeat it.’”

– Robert Sutton
The nine guidelines to applying the weird ideas successfully are:

1. **Sometimes, the best management is none at all.**
   To lead innovation requires a soft touch at best and preferably no touch whatsoever. The best leaders of creative companies help employees get the resources they need and then get out of their way of their way and let them do whatever gets results.

2. **Innovation always involves selling, not just inventing.**
   Something new and original will only be accepted if people are persuaded of its true value. Thus, selling is an integral element in being creative. Unless other people are persuaded to invest in it, buy one or try one out, even a truly great invention won’t make it very far. Selling matters.

3. **To innovate, you must be flexible and rigid simultaneously.**
   To be able to see new ideas or old things in a different light requires mental flexibility, but this must be tempered by some degree of rigidity as well. Otherwise, an innovator will “fold up his tent and steal away into the night air” at the first sign of a setback. Rigidity also enhances focus on developing products that are useable in the real world. Ideally, you want to keep the problem rigid and the potential solutions flexible, or you might reverse that — hold the solution constant and let the problems vary.

4. **Discomfort is inevitable and desirable when innovating.**
   Anytime you hire people that make you feel uncomfortable, a certain degree of discomfort is inevitable. The same thing happens when you hire people you don’t really need. Discomfort is a natural by-product of innovation. Besides, if everyone loves what you come up with, you aren’t pushing the envelope far enough.

5. **Always treat things like they are temporary conditions.**
   Businesses tend to treat everything like it is a permanent condition. By contrast, the leaders of creative organizations keep everyone on their toes by stressing the uncertainties of the marketplace. To them, everything is in a constant, evolving state of flux — so they must keep coming up with new innovations that will keep competitors at bay. Some of the most creative teams of all come together for one project and then disperse in a myriad of different directions right afterwards.

6. **Keep it simple.**
   Complexity stifles innovation because people get more focused on staying organized than on being original. To offset that, simplify everything. Don’t have internal clutter. Avoid huge sets of milestones and internal criteria. Let everyone focus their creative energies on coming up with new ideas rather than working the system.

7. **Be aware of the drawbacks of an innovative environment.**
   Creative organizations are always irritating, unsettling and frustrating places to work. Not many people are happy staying in that kind of environment long-term. Realize that sometimes, reality can be messy. Be well aware of the likely hazards before you make a large commitment to developing a highly innovative workplace.

8. **Learn how to fail faster, not less often.**
   The faster you find out what doesn’t work, the sooner you’ll get to where you want to be. Thus, don’t try and eliminate “screw-ups” — encourage them. Give employees permission to fail. Just make certain people are thinking about what’s happening, and are not repeating the same error over and over again.

9. **Open minds are good, closed minds are bad.**
   A person who is open to new ideas is far more likely to be creative than someone who has already decided the way things are. Encourage people to stay alert and receptive to new ideas, regardless of their source. And don’t forget to get the perspective of outsiders who are not intimately involved with the development process. Their point of view will always be a good “reality check” of the real world.

**Key Thoughts**

“The exact methods used to innovate are less important than building a company where people have the right attitudes toward their work and each other. Every innovative company I know of is filled with people who are passionate about solving problems. Playfulness and curiosity are related attitudes of innovation. My last attitude of innovation is really a pair of attitudes: the ability to switch emotional gears between cynicism and belief, or between deep doubt and unshakable confidence. These emotions are the tag-team partners of the innovation process. If your company is dominated by only one, you are in trouble.”

— Robert Sutton

“Ask yourself: ‘What if these ideas are true?’ How might I organize or manage my company differently? How should I act differently to make myself more creative? Play with these ideas in your mind and experiment with them in your company. These weird ideas have firm grounding and have helped other companies develop useful new ideas, but they are not immutable truths. Some cynicism is needed to make the best use of them. Treat them like toys you might buy to mess around with: Try to break them, take apart the pieces to see how they work, try to improve them, and mix them with your other toys. You might develop some of your own counterintuitive ideas along the way. Ultimately, anything that brings in new knowledge, helps people see old things in a new way, or helps a company break from the past will do the trick.”

— Robert Sutton