

# HOW TO SPARK INNOVATION IN AN EXISTING COMPANY

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**B**right ideas are, no doubt, the most important economic development force we have. We all need new ideas to cut costs, improve quality and service, and attract customers. Therefore, it is essential that we strive to encourage innovation within our businesses after the startup phase.

Here are a few steps to take if you want to encourage innovation in your business:

- **Designate every fourth staff meeting or department meeting as a brainstorming session.**

Brainstorming is an excellent method for generating new ideas. It is particularly useful when addressing recurring or chronic problems such as limited cashflow or high employee turnover. When traditional problem solving methods are not working, brainstorming provides a different — and rewarding — approach.

The rules of brainstorming help strengthen one of the central skills of creativity — divergent thinking. During a brainstorming session, participants are not permitted to judge ideas as good or bad. The goal of the session is to generate as many ideas as possible related to a given topic. Participants build on one another's ideas instead of judging them. At the end of the meeting, ideas are clustered for people to further develop at a later time.

- **Try “forced relationship” phrases.**

When a work group reaches an impasse and cannot seem to generate any new ideas about a problem, it may be time to exercise people's minds and pull them out of their mental ruts. Select something familiar to the people involved, like an animal, a place, or an object, and ask participants to generate descriptive phrases about the selected word.

For example, let's say the word is “Paris.” Responses could be “in France,” “large city,” “the Eiffel Tower,” “the high-speed train,” or “fashion designers”. Then, ask the participants to select a business-related topic in need of problem

solving. The group then tries to generate ideas about the business topic that are analogous to each phrase that was used to describe the familiar word.

For example, try the topic of “recruitment”.

- ◆ In France: Do we search where things are happening?
- ◆ Large city: Look for streetwise people.
- ◆ The Eiffel Tower: We need to think bigger.
- ◆ High-speed train: We need to move faster.
- ◆ Fashion designers: Need attention-getting, timely want ads.

This exercise helps people say things they might not otherwise have said or even realized they were thinking.

- **Try contests.**

Your employees could be asked to think about one particular product during a specific time period. Prizes can be awarded to the person or department that generates the greatest number of ideas for alternate uses of the product. Another prize could be awarded for the most innovative application for the product.

- **Use checklists and assume the affirmative.**

When reviewing a list of ways other companies have succeeded, it is tempting to conclude that your situation is so different from the circumstances that their approach could not possibly apply to you. For example, most business owners would assume that they could not grow their business the way Donald Trump grew his. This would be especially true if the business owner did not come from a wealthy family in the first place.

However, some of Trump's approaches to growth could apply to other businesses.

Wouldn't your chances for obtaining

financing improve if you emphasized that your business generates jobs? Couldn't you grow if your vendors financed your expansion? Couldn't your product benefit from attention-getting packaging? Large size? Bright colors? Foreign theme?

The trick to using checklists is to resist writing off possibilities and ask "HOW could we do...?" instead.

- **Try inter-functional task forces.**

Departments typically consist of people with like ideas and similar skills. It is often useful to have multiple perspectives early on in a problem solving process. An innocent question asked about profitability by an employee from a department other than accounting can spark some very interesting discussions.

- **Allow time for special projects.**

In a recession, many companies have to lay off some employees. People who still have their jobs often take on workloads that are so full they do not have time to experiment or learn something new. But burnout, routine, and boredom can lead to errors and reduced productivity — so no one really benefits from forcing people to work too hard.

A special project that will help the company may be the mental break a key employee needs. Allowing people to select projects for which they have some curiosity increases their chances of success.

Some of the most successful companies build improvement projects, participation in a cross-functional task force, and research into each employee's basic job description. Nothing speaks louder about your commitment to innovation than allocating budgeted dollars to research and development, pilot projects, and/or new ventures.

- **Demonstrate an interest in the customer's viewpoint.**

Employees want to do their jobs well. After all, who likes to hear complaints from disgruntled customers? Innovation is almost always associated with addressing customer needs. Most employees want to see that customer

needs are being addressed. If you discover that you are guessing what customers really want, try authorizing time limited market research projects. This will demonstrate commitment, encourage open communications, and provide needed information to spark innovation.

- **Celebrate initiative.**

Each time an employee makes a suggestion, tries something new, goes beyond the call of duty, or even asks a question, there is an opportunity to make people feel good about what they are doing — which is conducive to innovation.

One of the simplest and most effective ways to spark innovation on a daily basis is to work with employees to turn their complaints (and customer complaints) into constructive suggestions. Any time an employee is able to make a suggestion instead of a complaint, it is worthy of note and is the seed of future innovation.

*Known as **The Growth Strategist™**, Aldonna R. Ambler, CMC, CSP helps professional service firms, technology-driven businesses, and construction-related product/service for distribution companies reach their goal of **Achieving Accelerated Growth With Sustained Profitability®** through a combination of speaking, consulting, executive coaching, authorship, and growth financing. She has executed an ESOP, grown multiple international businesses, won multiple awards, provided expert testimony on economic growth at over 30 legislative hearings, conferred with Presidents in the Oval Office, has written over 100 articles and plans to publish "Four Entrepreneurial Styles" this fall. Aldonna was named the **national (USA) "Woman Business Owner of the Year"** and one of **NJ's Best 50 Women in Business**. She currently hosts a weekly Internet radio show, **The Growth Strategist™** on VoiceAmerica® Business ([www.business.voiceamerica.com](http://www.business.voiceamerica.com)) every Tuesday at 11 a.m. ET. Aldonna Ambler can be reached at [Aldonna@AMBLER.com](mailto:Aldonna@AMBLER.com), 1-888-ALDONNA (253-6662) or at [www.TheGrowthStrategist.com](http://www.TheGrowthStrategist.com).*

