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“Blue Sky Thinking” for Breakthrough Ideas In Innovation – Why Is It Needed?

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Last fall, I wrote a white paper, “A Short History of Idea Management,” that defined Idea Management from its beginnings as a suggestion box to its 3rd generation, which is just now entering the market.

Chuck Frey posted the paper at his innovationtools.com website, where it has been viewed by thousands, and the descriptions of generations that I created have started to stick.

One of the points that I raised in the white paper is that the 1st and 2nd generation software still offered by most of the Idea Management software vendors is sometimes acceptable for picking the low-hanging-fruit, but may not be good at finding breakthrough ideas.

Now, Dr. Robert Cooper, creator of the Stage-Gate[®] Idea-to-Launch process, has provided strong support for my comments about the problem with the following statement from his May 2007 “Winning at Product Innovation” newsletter. In it he says, “Product development in the US is shifting towards the low-hanging-fruit type of projects.”

The context for his statement is that productivity in New Product Development is down and that one of the significant causes is the “...shortage of blockbuster, game-changing and high value development projects...”

Let’s think about that for a minute. If companies are using first or second generation Idea Management software in NPD, could that be one of the causes of the shortage? Doesn’t it take blockbuster ideas to create blockbuster projects?

When Idea Management software first made its way into the corporate world back around 2000, one of the key vendors suggested that creativity is unimportant, and that idea volume is paramount. But, nearly ten years later, the results suggest otherwise. Without creativity, there may be few, if any, breakthrough ideas, and correspondingly fewer blockbuster projects.

Just to provide emphasis for Dr. Cooper’s comments, one company that recently bought into the volume philosophy of Idea Management told me that they really were not looking for breakthrough ideas; they believed in incremental ones. I wonder if that is the strategy their competitors are using? Hmm. As I’ve said before, sometimes it takes a breakthrough idea just to achieve incremental change. Incremental ideas can not be counted on to achieve even modest results.

I’ve spoken before about the need for creativity in idea development, and the readers of my white papers now understand that creativity must be an essential part of Idea Management software and Innovation as a whole.

One of my favorite expressions, attributed to David Lloyd George, is “Don’t be afraid to take a big step when one is indicated. You can’t cross a chasm in two small jumps.”

Yet this is apparently what many corporations are trying to do by combining lots of low-hanging-fruit ideas from 2nd generation Idea Management into one big step. It doesn’t seem to be working. Why? Volume is not the answer, quality is.

So far, only one software vendor has addressed that issue, and they have done an outstanding job of adding creativity tools to Idea Management through inclusion of electronic versions of the very successful brainstorming tools created by Mitch Ditkoff of Idea Champions, "Free the Genie," "JumpStart," and "Idea Lottery."

Now, Idea Management creativity has gone a step further by adding another tool to the software designed to create breakthrough ideas.

Many major corporations are already familiar with Mitch's "Blue Sky Thinking" process. This process, which he teaches to small corporate innovation groups, aims specifically for breakthroughs by taking the idea creator through an organized (but quick) process of wild wishes and fantasy to find the solution to a problem. The process always begins with, "How can I..."

Thanks to advances in web technology, the aforementioned vendor has produced an electronic interactive version of "Blue Sky Thinking" using Flash video. In this version Mitch first explains a step, then pauses the video while the ideator responds in a text field. The process continues through multiple steps until the result is a solution, perhaps a breakthrough. When the process is complete, the idea can be directly input.

There is one more important issue. How will the idea reviewers know a breakthrough idea when they see one? Obviously, the first step is to ensure that the reviewers know the importance of watching for ideas with breakthrough potential, but even more important is that they have a logical method of reviewing ideas.

Mass review won't work here (or anywhere else in my view), so the software has included another of Mitch's proven creations, the L-C-S method of idea review. Short for Likes-Concerns-Suggestions, the method is taught to reviewers in an embedded video in the software, and ensures that every idea gets a fair shake so that the really big ones won't get away!

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