



The Best Way to Solve a Crisis

Use innovation events to produce results.

By Ed Bernacki

When your organization faces a seemingly insolvable problem, what you need is new ideas. The question is how to find them. And the answer is simple: Ask the people who know your organization best.

The first step is to acknowledge that finding ideas to solve your problem is a worthy activity. It's not down time. It's an intellectual investment by your people for your success.

Plan an Innovation Event

When people come together to brainstorm ideas, don't think of it as a meeting. Think of it as a special innovation event like a mini-conference. It must be planned. People should prepare for it.

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Conferences have a theme. They're in interesting venues and designed for thinking. Participants are given an agenda and presented with options for participation. There may be a speaker whose job it is to generate some new thinking. There may be meals or entertainment.

Why bother to plan a mini-conference? People think best when they're relaxed, challenged, and involved. You can't compel their active involvement. You can demand attendance but you must earn their creative contributions. Thus, you must shape the event to draw people in and make it clear that their contributions are important. Here are steps to a successful innovation event:

- **Create a challenge statement.** Before any session, no matter how desperate your situation, clarify the specific challenge you face. Write it down. Review it until it represents the true reality, not the panic-driven reaction. List two or three implications of the problem or the potential opportunity. Define the overall theme as you would a marketing campaign.
- **Set a time and place for your**

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event. Find a space away from the day-to-day work environment that's as inspiring as possible. Plan for the event to last for one or two hours.

- **Choose participants.** If you can, involve six to eight people. Consider including an outsider, who may see things you and your team have missed. You may be too close to the situation, and fresh eyes may be just what you need.
- **Give participants copies of the challenge statement in advance.** Tell them to prepare a two-minute response. This gets people involved quickly.
- **Begin the event with a summary of the challenge.** Then have participants give their two-minute responses. Ask someone to be the scribe to record people's contributions.
- **Open the discussion.** You may see a viable option already. If so,

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discuss it further. If not, use creativity tools to get people's minds working. One useful option is to ask, "How would other groups see the situation? For example, how would accountants, nurses, or mothers look at the problem?" You may be surprised how this helps people think in new ways. Another creativity tool is brainstorming. Ask everyone to throw out as many ideas as possible, no matter how crazy, while the designated scribe writes them all down. For brainstorming to be effective, encourage an enthusiastic attitude in which all ideas are welcomed without criticism, preconceptions, or limits. The ideas that seem the silliest often lead to the most creative breakthroughs.

- **Look at the ideas that have been**

raised. Combine them to create even stronger ones. You can prioritize ideas or vote on them if several are of equal strength.

- **Close the session with a result.** Summarize the event by telling participants, "We looked at this challenge and found this result." Thank everyone for participating. Generate a feeling of achievement.
- **Plan ahead.** Sometimes the result may need more thought. If so, set a time and place for the next session.

Value Everyone's Insights

Even the most desperate situation can benefit from a planned innovation event. When you put time and thought into planning such an event, everyone will gain from the experience. When they do, they'll be more prepared to contribute next time. ■

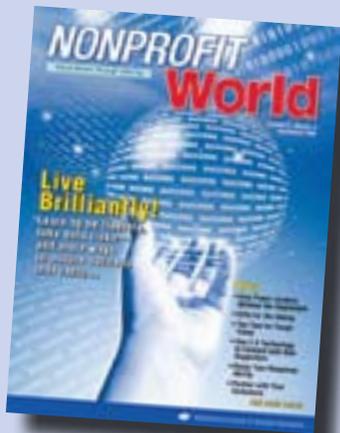
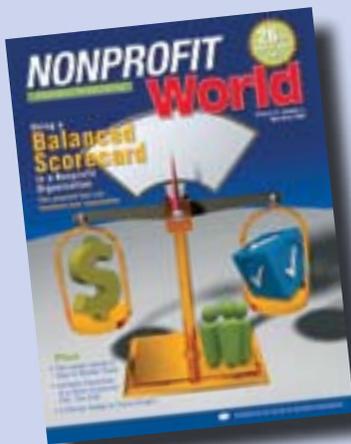
Based in Ottawa, Ed Bernacki is an international writer and speaker on innovation. Visit www.wowgreatidea.com.



Weather the Storm

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- **Creating Breakthroughs** (Vol. 26, No. 4)
- **Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions** (Vol. 26, No. 4)
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