

Creating Opportunities to Innovate

Turn your organization into an idea factory.

By Ed Bernacki



Organizations that are successful innovators do something others don't. Not only do they encourage a climate open to new ideas, they provide concrete opportunities for employees to innovate. Just talking about being creative isn't enough; people must take initiative if they're to reap results.

Consider how artists create great works of art. When Nobel Prize-winning author Ernest Hemingway started work on a book, he didn't wait for divine inspiration: He began writing every day at 11:00 a.m. His goal was 1,000 words per day regardless of how long it took. He built a special pedestal, as he preferred to stand when writing. And he stopped writing in the middle of a sentence to motivate himself to continue the next day.

Design an agenda for innovation by identifying 12 challenges.

Artists don't produce a creative product by osmosis or through discussion. They act. Organizations must also act. They must address this key question: What ideas do we need, and how can we get them? Here are some ways to shape this initiative:

Clarify Ideas

My first job was at a large association. My boss suggested we meet weekly to talk about new ideas and

Consider how artists create great works of art.

asked that I write them down beforehand. An odd thing happened when I wrote down an idea: Often within a day I thought of ways to advance the idea beyond my initial concept. During our meetings, we would usually narrow down the range of ideas to advance some further. This process of clarifying ideas by discussing and writing about them turned out to be an ideal method for managing ideas.

Pinpoint 12 Problems

Design an agenda for innovation by identifying 12 challenges, one for each month. Focus on two areas:

- new revenue-building ideas, such as new services, creative fundraising ideas, or entrepreneurial activities
- ways to prompt staff to work together more effectively.

Add Funding for New Opportunities

Throughout the year, you'll come across new ideas that you didn't integrate into your budget. You can't afford to stifle these ideas for months, so be sure to set aside some funding for ideas that have yet to be conceived.

Open a Space for Creativity

Some organizations designate special "creative rooms" or spaces to prompt new thinking. If you can't afford to set aside an entire room, use the corner of an office as a place for people to sit and brainstorm.

Start a Monthly Suggestion Box Challenge

Most suggestion boxes aren't effective. You can enhance a suggestion box program by defining specific problems in need of ideas. Pick one problem each month, and prompt staff conversations about it to encourage participation. Ensure you recognize people for their ideas and their initiative.

Make It Happen

The goal of all these pointers is to start the creative process. To earn the title "creative" means you must create something, not just talk about it. ■

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

Spotlight on Creativity

Read more about innovation in these *Nonprofit World* articles at www.snpo.org/members:

- **The Case for Cognitive Discrimination** (Vol. 27, No. 1)
- **The Organizational Personality & Employee Performance** (Vol. 21, No. 1)
- **Testing the Waters: How to Predict Response to Your New Idea** (Vol. 8, No. 5)
- **Not Taught in Business Schools: How to Cultivate Creative Leading** (Vol. 24, No. 5)
- **Eliminating Resistance to Change: The Magic Formula** (Vol. 10, No. 5)