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Three Techniques You Can Use When Confronted by Team Members' "Bad" Ideas.

Professor Robert Baron of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute interviewed 108 employees in a large food-processing company about their perceptions about corporate conflict. There were 14 possible sources of conflict. Management's morale-deflating criticism was ranked as a more powerful source of conflict than competition over limited financial resources or territorial disputes. (1988).

The way management communicates negative feedback is powerful. It can stifle innovative ideas just at the very time the company most requires innovative thinking.

On the other hand, managements' failure to be sufficiently critical can also create problems. Consider Xerox' fabled Palo Alto Research Center (PARC).

Some of the most innovative ideas in personal computing came out of that center. And yet it failed to achieve meaningful financial results. When Steve Jobs visited PARC, he immediately saw how one or two great ideas could be turned them into money-making devices. Why did PARC fail and Apple Succeed?

The problem at PARC was that its culture focused too much on innovation. There was not enough critical discussion about how to transform good ideas into revenue.

In other words, leaders face this dilemma: how can leaders strike the right balance between being critical of bad ideas without stifling innovation?

Unique Problems Faced By Scientific, Medical, and Academic Institutions.

Much of the European Middle Ages could be described as religious leaders making pronouncements about truth. And followers passively accepted what their leaders instructed. The Renaissance is really about the rise of the skepticism: no longer will we accept what leaders tell us at face value. What we are told will be subject to the rule of reason and standards of evidence.

The twin attitudes of skepticism and curiosity fueled the scientific, technical, and medical revolutions we see today.

When leaders fail to encourage both skepticism and curiosity, then the corporate culture begins to discourage innovation.

Based on our work with our clients, below are some techniques you might consider using.

Take the “You” Out of “Your Idea.”

Create a Score Card for ideas to prevent leaders from making global condemnations about the idea presenters. Examples of global condemnations would include “This is awful” or “You are wasting time” or “I can’t believe this...”

Score Cards can be as simple as the following:

“On a Scale of Zero to 10 for Creativity would score it 7. On a Scale of zero to 10 for making money for the company I would score it 2. Is there a way to move the idea so that the chances of making money are at least a 6?”

Notice that the word “you” never comes up. And the conclusion of the feedback is not negative. It is a challenge.

Consistent use of the Score Card allows team members to understand the key factors that you use to evaluate ideas. In the example above, the factors are originality and generating revenue for the company..

You want a consistent framework. Because of its consistency, you avoid the condemnation, “Is there NOTHING that can please this boss??!!”

How You Respond to Bad Ideas Sets a Framework for the Future of Good Ideas:

Those who work in R&D-centric industries like pharmaceuticals know that the vast majority of new ideas deserve to die. But the learning that takes place in dealing with bad ideas paves the way for innovative and practical future approaches.

For example, we knew one leader whose response to bad ideas would be an icy stare for three seconds, no comment, and then ignoring the individual for the duration of the

meeting. Given this reaction, why would a subordinate risk getting a reaction like this by presenting a novel approach?

As a leader, you do not have to accept bad ideas yet you can still express gratitude to the person who presented the idea. Your objective as a leader is to fertilize the soil for future good ideas from this individual or this team.

For example:

“What I like about this idea is that it looks at an old problem in our industry in a radically new way. Where this idea needs to go is what are the practical steps to get customers to change their habits? And can we afford the educational program to get customers to change their habits.”

Notice that the word “you” never appears. The focus is on the idea.

Notice that the structure forces the speaker to articulate “this is what I like” and “this is what needs to be done to improve the idea.”

Forcing yourself to respond to ideas you hate in a scripted fashion like this helps you avoid the kind of global condemnation that results in your office being known as the place where good ideas go to die.

If presented with a proposal and your immediate reaction is that you cannot find even one thing you like, avoid giving any feedback at all. Give yourself 24 hours to reflect on the idea. Be skeptical about your own reactions to new ideas.

Outsource Your Skepticism:

A third structure for giving feedback to innovative ideas is to outsource your skepticism. There are two ways of outsourcing skepticism.

The first is to institutionalize the “Devil’s Advocate” on your team. This means that another person on the team is given a specific role to play in that session. And that role is to be the most skeptical human being on the planet.

Change the person to be Devil’s Advocate at each meeting.

A second way to outsource criticism is to destroy the hub and spoke communication pattern you may have created.

In a hub and spoke pattern, the boss is the hub and subordinates go to the boss with new ideas for rejection or approval. They don’t necessarily need to discuss the idea with colleagues in other areas of the company.

Hub and spoke enlarges the importance of the leader but increases the silo mentality of team members.

Consider the following:

Before ideas are submitted to you, at least two peer level colleagues within the team must review and comment on the idea.

By introducing peer review, you outsource criticism and made a dent in you being the center of the hub and spoke communications system.

Be Wary About Spontaneity.

Many of the leaders we work with are trained as physicians, scientists, and engineers. A skeptical attitude is “natural” for them. But what the leader may believe is merely skepticism might be interpreted on the receiving end as implied insults against the person who presented the idea or a global condemnation of the person.

What is important are not your intentions as a leader but how your intentions are received by others.

We recommend structure to replace spontaneity in feedback. The suggestions made in this article are designed to create a climate that balances innovation and criticism.

Earlier in this piece we mentioned Professor Robert Baron. In the 1988 study he had 106 undergraduates receive “destructive” criticism for a task they were asked to complete. “Destructive” criticism meant that the feedback was general (“this is awful.”) and the attribution of poor performance was due to personal defect (“You seem to be lacking attention to detail.”).

Having been exposed to this destructive/general criticism, students were next asked to do another task. On the subsequent task these students set lower goals for themselves than a control group of students who had received no feedback or positive feedback.

You want to be known as the occupant of the office where even bad ideas are treated with respect. Those who strive to be innovative deserve your thanks even if the ideas themselves are rejected.

References:

Baron, Robert A. (1988). “Negative effects of destructive criticism: impact on conflict, self-efficacy, and task performance.” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 72(2) 199.

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Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel write monthly perspectives for **PSYCHOLOGY TODAY** called “Platform for Success: the making of Great Leaders.” To view their columns:

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