



EFFECTIVE LEADERS CAPTURE THE UNUSED IDEAS

Ever wonder what happened to the unused ideas germinated on the way to finding the solution to your project? Where did they go? Did anyone save them? Because experience shows there could be gold in those ideas.

Keeping those unused ideas is the leader's job. While a team is focused on narrowing down the number and scope of ideas in order to bring something specific to life, the leader needs to find ways to capture the discarded pieces left behind, the ideas that seemingly don't apply. It's the leader's job because he's the steward of the field of possibility from project beginning to end, says Mel Toomey, founder of the Center for Leadership Studies. Possibilities add up to innovation which in turn underpins sustained growth.

It was just such a pushed-aside idea on that field of possibility that led to six new patents and tens of millions of dollars in new revenue for the developer of an oral hygiene product. No kidding.

To have sustained growth, an organization must maintain a continuous pipeline of business-building initiatives, says Mehrdad Baghai, Stephen Coley and David White in their book *The Alchemy of Growth*. They must aggressively manage the pipeline and provide the leadership to do so. The three look at developing initiatives using three horizons. The first is to have a strong and defensible core business, one that can be extended. The second is to build emerging businesses, the third, which is farthest out in the future, is to create viable options for those businesses. All three must be aggressively tended if an organization is going to prosper long-term.

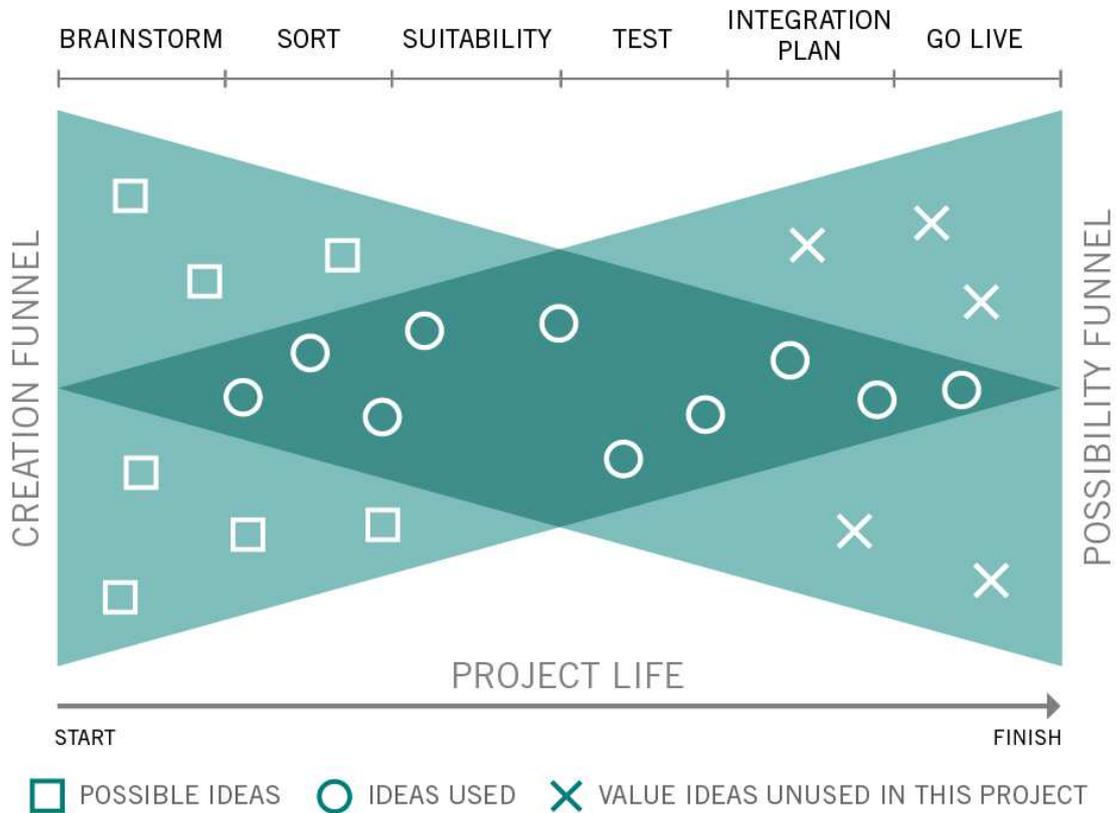
The CEO of a large, Dallas-based multinational displayed some of that leadership when he put a pipeline in place and asked every unit in the company to fill it. He did so because he calculated the company could not make the leap it needed in revenue without new ideas. In the first round of assessment, he assigned teams to look at the new ideas to see if they had merit. If they made it to the second round, he asked for business and implementation plans. There might even be some test runs in the second stage. If they passed to the third and final stage, the ideas would go live to see if they could meet financial and other expectations over a specific time period. Senior leaders throughout the company led the effort to keep the pipeline full at all three stages.

In a different take on development of possibilities, including catching the unused possibilities, look at the accompanying chart with its two funnels developed by Toomey. The first with the wide mouth on the left is the creation funnel; the second with the wide mouth on the right is the new possibility funnel.

The funnels display a way of thinking through the stages of creation bringing the new product or service to reality. They could be used to augment the pipeline described above.

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The creation funnel starts wide because the possibilities for reality are many. It ends at a single point signifying the final solution. Moving from left to right, the funnel has six slices. The first slice is where the brainstorming occurs. The second slice is the place to sort possibilities from the brainstorming into probable realities. The third is for measuring the suitability of the possibilities versus the intended purpose. These tests need to be designed and if a possibility fails the test, it's out of the running for this purpose. Feasibility gets tested in the fourth slice through running pilots and other tests. In the fifth slice is for creating the plan to integrate the possibility into the organization. The sixth is to go live. By now, it's known if there are flaws. If so, they can and will be ironed out with feedback from the marketplace.



The possibility funnel, meanwhile, is wide open where the creation funnel has narrowed to a single point. As the project progresses, the two funnels cross over each other. Possibilities start to occur that are irrelevant for bringing what's imagined into reality. It's those possibilities that must be captured and nurtured.

Be careful in asking your organization for ideas, for possibilities. To tell your technical people and others down the line they need to be more innovative may come across as an insult. That's because when you look just below the surface in many organizations, what you find is work gets done by circumventing official guidelines. It's that way because many workers care enough to jerry-rig the solutions.

So rather than tell, leaders need to create a safe space into which they invite employees to discover – a space where issues of status, uncertainty, autonomy and fairness are left at the door. It's there where peoples' creative, collaborative juices will shine and so yield the most and best ideas.