INNOVATION

5 Tips for Leaders:
Building Better Ideas With Your Team

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Opportunities to generate ideas come up in every meeting. Five ways to tap the brainpower of your team at any time.

Most leaders have experimented with various forms of brainstorming or other formal methods for generating ideas. Still, opportunities for generating ideas come up informally and frequently during team meetings or work sessions. Here are a few tips for taking advantage of the brainpower and creativity of your team members at any time.

1. **Be the last, not the first, to express your opinion.** If team members suspect that you have a "right answer" in mind, they'll try to find it and that leads to a guessing game, not creative ideation.
2. **Don't judge ideas, positively or negatively, while you are in the ideation phase.** Use neutral phrases to encourage team members, such as "Thanks!" "I like that you're coming up with a lot of ideas…" (or pushing beyond our usual practices, expressing big ideas, etc.). Even your facial expression or voice tone may suggest that you approve or disapprove and that can lead to members suppressing ideas that seem too different from what others are saying.
3. **Never run with the first "good" idea.** Always ask for more. You can even set a goal, i.e., "Come up with 20 new applications for that service in the next 5 minutes."
4. Ask team members to identify their limiting assumptions based on the ideas they have come up with so far – then challenge them to generate ideas they would consider if they ignored those limits.
5. **Once the team has run down, but before applying other criteria, ask them which ideas they see as impossible.** Then challenge them to adjust the ideas so they would be just possible. Ask, "How could we make that work?"

There's no need to wall off creative thinking from other activities your team is engaged in – but even if it's just for five minutes, remember that different rules apply when you're generating ideas: Withhold judgment, encourage building on the ideas of others, go for as many ideas as possible before it's time to narrow down to the most promising ones. Teams that understand and practice the rhythmic beat among generating ideas, exploring them, evaluating and then deciding on them are likely to become more engaged, lively, creative, and innovative – and to attract and retain the best talent.

For more, see Building Better Ideas: How Constructive Debate Inspires Courage, Collaboration, and Breakthrough Solutions (Berrett-Koehler, 2019).

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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