

INNOVATION

Growing *Ideas*

B. Kim Barnes

THE INFLUENCE GURU

Ideas are a lot like plants in a garden. Four stages, and a different kind of conversation required at each one.

Ideas are not innovations — yet. But with patience and skill, you can help them develop into products, services, processes, and experiences that create real value. To have great ideas, you as a team member or leader have to start with a lot of different ideas. Then you have to treat them in the right way at the right time in order to give them a chance to succeed. Ideas are a lot like plants in a garden. When they are young, they need to be nurtured, nourished, treated gently. They need time and space to grow. Later, when they have developed and become stronger, you need to prune them, even pull some up to make room for others. Similarly, the way you talk with people about their ideas should depend on the level of development of the idea. There are four stages in idea development; each requires a different response if your goal is to end up with a large number of ideas that can become innovations.

Ideas can arise in a seemingly spontaneous way — as if the wind had scattered seeds that land and find a place to develop. They can pop up in unexpected places. Often, though, seeds are planted in a deliberate manner. They are placed where the soil has been made ready, at the right depth, with the right conditions. They are focused on becoming a certain kind of plant — if you plant a pumpkin seed, you expect a pumpkin — but some pumpkin seeds will be superior to others as they go through the process of germinating, developing, and coming to maturity. Ideas are similar, both in the way they develop naturally and in the way you can encourage and support them in their development.

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They need time and space to grow.*

The four stages

STAGE ONE

Planting the Seeds

Leaders who encourage innovation do a good job of preparing the soil. They make sure it has plenty of nutrients such as access to the external marketplace of ideas and information, tolerance for diverse points of view, openness to unusual options, deferring of judgment, and unwillingness to run with the first decent suggestion. They define an area where the seeds should be planted — some limits are best for the development and nurturing of great ideas as well as healthy plants. They make sure there is space and time enough for getting the “idea seeds” ready to plant — and are sensitive to the right timing. Early in the ideation process, they ask open-ended questions, listen, and draw the person out. They are neutral and accepting, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. In this way, the idea has a chance to develop as the person thinks out loud while others listen and create a space for thoughtful development. They are in a “greenhouse” atmosphere — the idea is protected from the elements until it has a chance to germinate, take root, and begin to sprout.

AT THIS STAGE, YOU MIGHT SAY

- *Tell me more about that...*
- *How might that work?*
- *What other options do you see?*

STAGE TWO

Cultivating the Seedlings

When you plant a garden, you take on the responsibility for seeing it through the season. Seedlings need to be nourished, fed, watered, protected from their natural enemies. Some natural enemies of new ideas are entrenched interests, narrow-mindedness, tactical rather than strategic focus, and fear of loss or failure. Once the idea is fully communicated and the person is satisfied with how it is expressed, others can build on it and suggest upgrades and alternatives in a more active two-way conversation. They continue withholding judgment, but begin participating in the active growth of the idea — fertilizing and watering it, as it were.

AT THIS STAGE, YOU MIGHT SAY

- *How can we improve on that?*
- *What could we combine?*
- *How can we extend this line of thinking?*

STAGE THREE

Testing Viability

At this point, ideas must be put to the test of viability. Can they stand on their own outside of the “greenhouse”? Do they work? Does it look as though they will be able to accomplish what they were intended to do? Now is the time to experiment, test, prototype. As a leader, you can encourage people to try things out rather than talk them to death. Remind yourself that “the perfect is the enemy of the good,” and support inexpensive and experimental ways for your team to prove the concept that their idea represents.

AT THIS STAGE, YOU MIGHT SAY

- *How can you show that?*
- *Let's demonstrate how it works.*
- *Build a simple prototype.*

STAGE FOUR

Pruning

Once the ideas can stand on their own, they can be exposed to outside influences. Show them to the people who might support, invest in, buy, or use the product, service, process, application, paradigm, or experience each idea represents. Now that the ideas have been well developed and tested, it's time to challenge them and allow them to compete with other developed ideas. Establish a forum where the ideas can be the focus of attention and invite critical as well as positive feedback. Take it all in and use it to reshape and improve the ideas, to make them stronger and easier to understand.

AT THIS STAGE, YOU MIGHT SAY

- *Have you considered...?*
- *What if X happens...?*
- *What are the risks?*

Summary

If you want people to innovate, they need:

- Time and space to think
- Exposure to diverse points of view and resources from the outside
- Good questioning and listening to help them develop their ideas
- Opportunity to build on, improve, and challenge one another's ideas and to debate ideas on their merits

- Resources to prototype and test their ideas or prove the concept
- Feedback from potential customers, sponsors, and end-users
- Clear decisions and resource commitments
- Support for failing fast and moving on
- Encouragement to optimize on their ideas and learn from the innovation experience, whether successful or not

A leader of innovation, like an experienced gardener, is sensitive to the changing requirements of his or her garden of ideas — and is flexible enough to provide the right amount and the right type of intervention at the right time.

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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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