INNOVATION

How to Uncover Great Ideas and Develop Talent:

3 Simple Rules for Innovation Leaders (or Parents)

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Praise, building on an idea, and admiring a drawing can all stop the creative process cold. Three rules for the early phases of ideation.

Sometimes doing what comes naturally doesn't achieve the results you hope for. Sometimes what we learn as best practices aren't. Do any of these situations sound familiar?

> SOUND FAMILIAR?
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> - In a team meeting, your newest employee tentatively puts an idea forward. You think it's very promising and you want to encourage him or her, so you praise the idea and the employee.
> - You've just heard an idea from one of your team members. It resonates with you and you immediately begin to build on it, adding your own thoughts to develop it further.
> - Your young child shows you a drawing. You're very busy, but you take a moment to admire it and comment on his or her artistic talent, then put the work up for display.

So, what's the problem here? We've learned as leaders and parents how important it is to encourage and provide positive feedback. Except…in each of the situations above, you've done something that stops the creative process cold.

In the first instance, there can be an impact both on the individual and the team. Praising an idea too early can stop the ideation process for the originator (I guess it's good enough if the boss likes it) and others on the team may refrain from putting out their ideas, especially if they're very different from the one that was approved by the leader.

In the second situation, the idea may become yours. Often, a more junior team member will hesitate to build on, improve, and take responsibility for implementing an idea once that idea has been altered and "improved" by his or her manager.

In the third example, your child may learn to distrust your praise once he or she sees drawing by peers that are clearly better. This may discourage further creative efforts or, alternatively, create a dependency on parental admiration, making it less likely that he or she will "color outside the lines" and try something really new.

So, how can you intervene in a way that encourages team members or progeny to be creative and to move interesting ideas into action?

For many years, I have followed three rules during the early phases of the creative process – I'm not sure where I learned them, but they have proven to be highly valuable when I remember to use them! They are focus, attention and acceptance.

Focus

Keep your focus on the other person. Rather than "improving" his or her idea, encourage him or her to tell you more about it. Ask for his rationale or examples of how the idea might work. Be curious, not challenging at this phase. Listen actively to key points without trying to change the meaning or add your own embellishments. This can help the other to think through the idea while maintaining ownership of it.

Attention

Even the quietest person on your team can enjoy developing an idea out loud in a thoughtful way if he or she isn't rushed or interrupted. Having the full, even rapt attention of others – especially people we admire and respect – can create a sense of one's value to the group. Treating someone as the most interesting person in the room benefits both you and the other – you may actually learn something, and he or she will think you are a brilliant conversationalist.

Acceptance

It's too easy to substitute judgment – either positive or negative – for thoughtful consideration and interest in another's idea. I think most of us have learned to suspend criticism early in the life of an ideation process, but what about positive feedback? This, too, can cut creative thinking short and as a leader, praising an idea too early may unintentionally signal what the politically correct response should be, thereby limiting the scope of ideas that are generated.

Of course, all of these behaviors – building on, improving, and evaluating ideas – will be useful once you have a broad and diverse range of options.

Oh, and that drawing? Put down your phone and ask your child to tell you all about it. Your focus, attention, and acceptance can lead you both to new and interesting places.

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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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