

MANAGEMENT

The fine art of idea pottery and carving

According to an old saying, an idle brain is the devil's workshop.

In view of the danger of inactivity, it is of key importance that a leader does not succumb to passivity when selecting ideas from a pool of suggestions. Those might have been generated during various creative endeavors. One example is the "innovation honeymoon", the unusually insightful and creative initial period of new organizational members.

Decision-makers first have to enter the pre-sorted ideas on the "strategic winnowing sieve", a matrix aggregating the selection criteria used for scoring proposals on the "innovation honeymoon board" (see illustration). After inspecting both, the board and sieve, they need to engage in what I call "idea pottery" and "idea carving". Viewed in its entirety, the process of idea selection, which forms an integral part of idea workout, is not only an analytical exercise, but also an act of imagination and creation. It involves the following three steps.

1. Get into an artistic state of mind

First, the "idea-shaper-in-chief" and his team must adopt the mindset of a fine artist who is capable of producing splendid original thoughts. This can be achieved by stepping into a relaxing environment and recalling anchor experiences of extremely fertile imagination.

Mental readiness for the creative task at hand is also aided by the innovation honeymoon board, since it stimulates both sides of the brain. Continuous active employment of this instrument makes it more likely that all members will exploit the full potential of their mind when shaping the options and, after a balanced review of all the proposals on the table, reach valid conclusions.

Both the holistic appraisal of options and use of moon images appeal to the right side of the brain. The effect is heightened when different colors and a wide variety of visuals are used. At the same time, this strategic winnowing tool allows the left side of the brain to engage in detailed, fact-based and logical analyses, thus preparing the ground for intelligent interpretation and modification.

2. Purifying the input

Potters intent on producing delicate pieces of art with smooth surfaces have to try their best to remove stones from the clay. Likewise, leaders should strive hard to remove impurities from their decision-making input. The contrasts produced by the various intra-case and inter-case comparisons on the innovation honeymoon board make the assessment of individual options more meaningful. At the same time, the tool can help the guiding light recognize potential biases produced by contrast effects and eliminate them from the material used for subsequent

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shaping.

For example, one proposal might look very appealing simply because all other options obtained extremely low scores. People are particularly prone to be misled when choices are presented in succession, since this can result in priming effects. Fortunately, the innovation honeymoon board helps avoid such sequencing bias. It presents all options at the

might look and feel after they have been perfected.

With this vision in mind, he can start molding the proposals. The objective is to increase their ratings on all summary dimensions in the strategic winnowing sieve. Such progress is shown visually by the movement of ideas toward the upper right-hand corner of the two-by-two matrix (see illustration). The innovation honeymoon board is extremely useful for bettering proposals, since it displays all the granular factors underlying the generic assessment dimensions. With this tool, idea potters can review all moon micro-ratings for an individual option and, in several iterations, try to increase them.

Potters remove uneven parts from the works of art they have formed on their wheel and etch decorative designs on them. Likewise, leaders also have to act as idea carvers, improving their artifacts by cutting out the unnecessary parts of proposals and thus making them more appealing.

ity analysis, assessing the economic impact of various strategic changes. Among other things, this can help detect key cost drivers and develop specific measures targeting them. For example, it may be possible to cut out frills from a product, which can have a disproportionately large effect on its development costs.

Many systematic assessment exercises, which impose an intellectually appealing order on a patchwork of ideas, fail because the decision-maker succumbs to what I call the "pseudo-scientific fallacy". This happens in the absence of rigorous empirical testing, when he trusts in the completeness of data, absolute validity of conclusions, and thus overestimates the accuracy of resulting rankings.

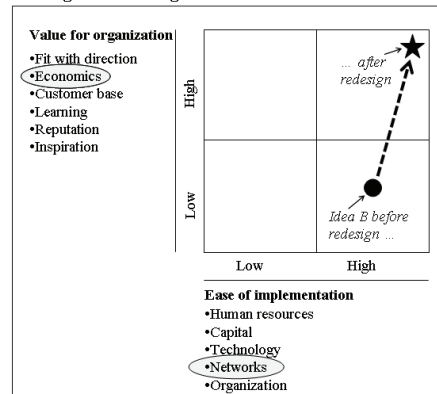
Alas, sophisticated analytic tools often hide imperfections, such as unreliable input used to evaluate proposals and the subjective character of assessments.

The process of idea pottery and idea carving mitigates this risk. It

impresses on a leader that options are malleable to some extent and that they should be treated as work in the process of improvement. Fortunately, there is also an in-built stabilizer: During the journey toward excellence, the idea potter and carver concentrates only on a few actionable levers. They bring about most of the improvements, a result deemed good enough. This exclusive focus on what matters most helps the guiding spirit avoid the dire fate frequently encountered by perfectionists. The latter's end-

The practice of idea pottery and carving

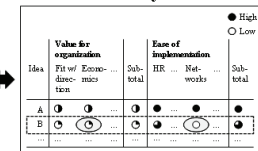
Strategic winnowing sieve



Example

○ = Hypothesized key leverage points

Innovation honeymoon board



Idea pottery and carving

- Significantly improve cost structure by cutting out expensive frills
- Leverage networks of suppliers and distributors to facilitate product rollout in existing geographical market
- Establish strategic alliance with competitor to enter new geographical market



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same time in one place, thus facilitating parallel idea processing.

The standard-bearer may also search the existing options to get ideas for new proposals. A more diversified portfolio of suggestions can help remove impurities, such as misleading contrasts, from the "idea clay".

3. Shaping the ideas

An excellent carver looks at a piece of wood and humbly asks it to tell him what it is destined to become. The strategic winnowing sieve displays raw ideas, which still have to be shaped. Mimicking a truly submissive carver, the torch-bearer should try to discern the potential of raw ideas and imagine in as much detail as possible how they

In the first round of imaginative reviews, the guiding spirit must work with his team to identify key actionable levers, especially areas where 20 percent of efforts produce 80 percent of improvements. With such a targeted search strategy, nobody needs to "boil the ocean". Then, the team has to develop hypotheses on how to redesign the proposal at hand so that the ratings in the identified pivotal areas will actually go up.

For example, the net present value of a suggested project might be negative, resulting in a low rating on the sub-criterion "economics". In this case, the reviewer should return to his spreadsheet and identify key enhancement spots. An excellent approach is to perform a sensitiv-

less striving for unattainable completeness ultimately kills imperfect but sufficiently valuable proposals, as attested by the often misunderstood adage: The best is the enemy of the good!

(Part 9 of the "Innovation Honeymoon" series. To be continued)

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