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Sparking Nonprofit Innovation
Weird Management Ideas That Work

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SPARKING NONPROFIT INNOVATION

Weird management ideas that work

Hire people who make you squirm. Find happy employees and encourage them to fight. And reward failure. Sound like weird management ideas? In some circles, they are. But when it comes to nonprofit innovation, these ideas can be essential.

To innovate, nonprofits must do things that clash with accepted management practices, with common but misguided beliefs about the right way to manage any kind of work. In organization after organization, managers act as if they can keep developing new programs, services, and solutions by adhering to old ways of managing people and making decisions. This happens even in organizations where managers say that innovative work requires different practices than routine work. Yet these same managers continue to use methods that force people to see old things in old ways, expecting new and valuable ideas to somehow magically appear.

Make no mistake – most of what organizations do, and should do, is not creative or weird. When nonprofit directors want to do things in proven ways, they are wise to drive out variation – especially when the proven ways still work. Nonprofits that use tried-and-true methods do things faster, cheaper, and more consistently than those that rely on new and unproven knowledge.[1] Doing routine work with proven methods is the right thing to do most of the time. There is ample evidence, after all, that most new ideas are bad, and most old ideas are good. But when innovation is the goal, organizations need variation in what people do, think about, and produce.

by ROBERT I. SUTTON

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INTUITIVE,
REASONING, REFLECTIVE
FACULTIES.
LITERARY,
OBSERVING, KNOWING,
Intuition
Criticism
Comparison
Comparison
Eventuality
Association
Actions
Mental
Physical
Reasoning
Causality
Planning
Locality
Exploration
Time
Measure
Wit
Color

“We have no tolerance for risk. Especially these days, we the bone, *into* the bone. We can’t *afford* to reward failure”

In my book *Weird Ideas That Work* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), I present 11-and-a-half weird ideas that promote innovation in the for-profit world. I advocate everything from hiring “slow learners” to hiring people you don’t need – ideas that seem counterintuitive to most managers. But research shows that my ideas spark innovation by helping companies do at least one of three things: (1) increase variance in available knowledge, (2) see old things in new ways, and (3) break from the past. These are the three basic organizing principles for innovative work.

The question remains, are these weird ideas being used in the nonprofit sector as well? To find out, we put the question to executive directors who recently completed Stanford’s Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders.

Several of these leaders pointed out that my ideas for innovation assume management can afford to take big risks – something nonprofits generally can’t afford, especially in a time of shrinking resources. “The premise of the weird ideas is based on a model that does not translate easily into the nonprofit sector,” said Jennifer Duston, executive director of the Oakland East Bay Symphony. “It’s based on a for-profit model ... where they expect not only to take risks, but to take losses. We cannot suffer those losses. We have no tolerance for risk. Especially these days, we are cutting expenses – not just to the bone, but *into* the bone. ... We can’t *afford* to reward failure.”

The daily pressures on overburdened directors make weird approaches unappealing. “A nonprofit arts director in this day and age is fighting so many battles; the temptation is to put your energy where the fires are,” said Georgina Lagoria, director of the Contemporary Museum of Honolulu. “Imagine how easy it would be to have someone come in and *not* challenge the status quo.”

Yet we found that at least three weird ideas resonated with nonprofit leaders. Some of them hired people who make them uncomfortable. Others said they looked for happy employees and encouraged them to fight. And still others rewarded failure and punished inaction. All the nonprofit leaders said they had implemented at least one weird idea, and that they would implement others if they could. Several leaders emphasized that using the offbeat management practices was imperative precisely *because* nonprofits often have to get by on so little. “Putting ideas out there and being bold about your thinking is *free*,” said Louise King Lanzilotti, managing director of the Honolulu Theater for Youth.

Lanzilotti went a step further, suggesting that for nonprofits – many of which have creative, artistic cultures that are experimental by nature – the ideas are not that far-fetched. “We tend to understand the ‘weird ideas’ intuitively,” she said. “To us, the ideas are ‘normal,’ not weird.”

Hire people who make you uncomfortable, even those you dislike

One of the most persistent findings in the behavioral sciences is that people prefer to spend time with similar people. Study after study confirms that “birds of a feather flock together,” while there is little evidence that “opposites attract.”

Our emotional responses to a job candidate are like a divining rod. When we have negative emotional reactions to people, it may not have anything to do with whether they can do the job. Rather, it can be because they have different beliefs, ideas, and knowledge. I am not suggesting you actively seek out rude, insulting, or incompetent people for your nonprofit. If, however, a candidate seems competent and has skills your organization needs – but has different beliefs, knowledge, and skills than most insiders – negative emotional reactions or evaluations are reasons in favor of hiring the person. It will help bring in new ideas.

When I present this weird idea to executives, managers, and engineers, it provokes three reactions. They look at me as if I am out of my mind. They tell me that if their company hired people who didn’t like one another, it would undermine teamwork and make it a horrible place to work. A few people, however, respond with stories about how their organization has benefited from people who make everyone uncomfortable – even who are widely disliked – because they think differently, act differently, have different backgrounds, or advocate unpopular ideas.

Consider what Marilyn Sullivan did. Sullivan is the executive director of Bethlehem Haven, an emergency shelter and support organization for homeless women in Pittsburgh. Several years ago, Sullivan hired an engineer as a vol-

Management Practices That Work

REPLICATE THE PAST	BREAK FROM THE PAST
Hire people who make you feel comfortable, whom you like	Hire people who make you uncomfortable, even those you dislike
Find some happy people, and make sure they don’t fight	Find some happy people, and get them to fight
Reward success, punish failure and inaction	Reward success and failure, punish inaction

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are cutting expenses – not to

unteer, despite real concerns that she would clash with her organization's culture. "I was uncomfortable, and I had my doubts as to whether she would work out," Sullivan said. "She seemed rigid. I thought that an engineer would think more in the box instead of outside. Everything is measured and ruled [for an engineer]. And this place is organized chaos."

Yet the very qualities that Sullivan worried about turned out to be a boon. The engineer was quickly promoted to a part-time, paid position. She took the languishing volunteer program and turned it around, put a work schedule in place, developed a volunteer manual, and created structure where there was none. She revamped and improved a quarterly newsletter. She used her computer skills to create formal invitations for an afternoon tea party with the executive director. "She does all the little things that I don't do," Sullivan said.

But she also did some big things. Sullivan had trouble convincing the homeless shelter residents to volunteer at the Pittsburgh Community Storehouse in exchange for much needed supplies. One obstacle was the lack of reliable transportation, so the engineer convinced the property manager and maintenance man to drive the women to the storehouse, and then set up a regular schedule. With transportation in place, the women began to volunteer, and the shelter received everything from nylons, bras, and sweaters to office and medical supplies. "She salvaged our reputation," Sullivan said. "She organized it and made it happen."

I've found other managers who actively seek out job candidates and colleagues who make them uncomfortable because it sparks needed innovations. Peter Skillman, director of product design engineering at the for-profit Handspring, says, "Hire people who make you squirm; that's how you get new ideas." Quite a few managers have told me that, when they are trying to bring in some new ideas, they hire people whom they expect other insiders will dislike, or at least will feel uncomfortable around.

That is just what Lanzilotti did at the Honolulu Theater for Youth, which has been producing children's shows on the island for 48 years. Last spring, after a technical director was fired, the theater was thrust into chaos. They were about to open a show called "Runny Noses, Tiny Tales," but they were way behind, and the entire staff was pitching in to get the risers built in time. That week, an ex-Marine was on site interviewing for the tech rigger job. The muscular ex-Marine with the crew cut pitched in to build the risers, at one point working 20 hours a day.

Lanzilotti was trying to decide whether to hire the ex-Marine for the rigger job, so she took an informal poll of her 25-person staff. "There were many negative comments about him," she said. "People thought he was pushy, that he was not going to be so good around women, that he was too brassy." They also thought the Southern "macho" ex-Marine with the "tough dude" attitude

would not fit in with the theater's reserved and accommodating Hawaiian culture. "People said, 'Oh my God! Don't hire that guy!'" Lanzilotti recalled. "*Everyone* thought we shouldn't hire him."

But she had a different idea. Not only was Lanzilotti impressed with the ex-Marine's work ethic, she believed the very traits that made people uncomfortable – his straightforward talk and manner – would work to the theater's advantage. "People here tend to not always talk about things up front," she said. "It's subtle, but I think jiggling that a bit is a good idea, because you don't solve a lot of things when you don't know what the problems are. People who are more upfront ... help with getting everything out in the open."

The ex-Marine quickly got the set building back on track, taking a huge burden off of the artistic director. He also went above and beyond, establishing mutually beneficial ties with local busi-

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"We tend to understand the 'weird ideas' intuitively. To us, the ideas are 'normal' – not weird"

weave others' ideas together with their own, to insist that others provide compelling logical rationale for their ideas, and to contribute still more ideas.[2] The resulting solutions were more comprehensive, integrated, and well defended.

When everyone in a group always agrees, it may mean that they don't have many ideas. Or it may mean that avoiding conflict is more important to them than generating and evaluating new ideas. It may even mean that people who express new ideas are ridiculed, ostracized, and driven out of the group. Regardless of the reasons, lack of conflict and dissent means the group is unlikely to express and develop many valuable new ideas. Groups that stifle people with new, untested ideas undermine both imagination and personal freedom. As Robert F. Kennedy put it, "It is not enough to allow dissent. We must demand it." Or to paraphrase chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr., "When two people in business agree, one of them is unnecessary."[3]

Constructive conflict happens when people argue over ideas rather than personality or relationship issues. Researchers call this "task" or "intellectual" conflict. This kind of conflict happens when people "base discussion on current factual information" and "develop multiple alternatives to enrich the debate."[4] These are fights over which ideas are best, and why – in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Some of the most creative groups and organizations in history had people who respected each other but fought mightily over ideas.

Nonprofits are no exception. Just ask Duston, of the Oakland East Bay Symphony. In 2000, her nonprofit went through a roiling internal debate that still reverberates today. The symphony was considering a high-profile collaborative performance with another arts organization. Some staff members felt the performance was too financially risky; others believed just as strongly that the collaboration was crucial for community outreach. "It was hotly debated, and it was painful," Duston said.

"Because of our internal haranguing over this, we went back to the other organization with a lot of hard questions," Duston added. The symphony wound up collaborating with the other arts organization, and though it took a small financial loss, it was viewed as a community success. Some of the team members were

nesses the old-fashioned way. He sat down with folks, bantered about their families, and gave them free theater tickets and cases of beer. After befriending workers at one nearby company, he convinced them to give the theater three flats of 4-foot by 8-foot foam core, used for props, sets, and show posters. He convinced other companies to donate lumber and discount tools. "He has a good way of associating with people," Lanzilotti said, adding that in some important (though not obvious) ways, the American South turns out to be "just like Hawaii."

Find some happy people and get them to fight

If you want innovation, you need happy warriors, upbeat people who know the right way to fight. A growing body of research suggests that conflict over ideas is good, especially for groups and organizations that do creative work. Constant argument can mean there is a competition to develop and test as many good ideas as possible, that there is wide variety in knowledge and perspectives. One study, for example, showed that when group members fought over conflicting ideas, it provoked them to

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unhappy with the internal debate, "but in the end it probably saved our shirts," Duston said. The symphony also learned key lessons about what questions to ask and when to ask them. In its new strategic plan, an entire section will be devoted to addressing project selection criterion, with clear guidelines and a specific departmental review schedule.

There is mounting evidence that groups that avoid interpersonal conflict – and stick to intellectual conflict – are more effective, especially at creative work.[5] But intellectual conflicts are never so free of personal animus, stubbornness, or anger as this distinction implies. Groups that fight over ideas can easily slip into nasty personal conflict, especially when reputations, careers and big bucks are riding on the group's performance. People whose ideas are attacked may, perhaps rightly, believe they are facing thinly veiled personal attacks. These negative reactions can make it hard to learn from critical comments. They may also provoke revenge, which can be cloaked as rational arguments against an opponent's position or be unbridled personal attacks against the critic's skill or integrity.

Mary Simon, executive director of the San Jose-based Resource Area for Teachers (RAFT), has instituted a system to help her employees fight right. Simon uses the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, a questionnaire based on Karl Jung's theories on psychological type preferences, to keep necessary heated arguments from getting personal. Simon is an ISTP – Introvert, Sensor, Thinking, Perceiving; her director of education is an EITP – Extrovert, Intuitive, Thinking, Perceiving. "We have differences, and we will often come at things from very different directions," Simon says. "In meetings, I'll say, 'This is the S part of me talking,' or I'll say, 'You are an N, and I don't see it that way.' It makes it so that it's not personal anymore."

Getting employees to fight in a way that is productive, and not personal, can have important ramifications for the workplace, because it can keep employees happy. There is a huge body of literature exploring the advantages of positive emotion, especially for creative tasks. Psychologists in the United States have devoted an enormous amount of time to studying the virtues of positive emotions. Studies examined the differences between happy and unhappy, optimistic and pessimistic people, people with positive affect versus negative affect, happiness versus sadness, and so on. No matter what you call it, there is strong evidence that traveling through life in a good mood is a good thing, especially if you want to be creative.

Lanzilotti says the key for her colleagues, when fighting, is to focus on the bigger picture. "We try to keep reminding ourselves it's about theater, and it's not personal," she says. "Ideas are powerful, and they can't hurt you."

Hire People Who Make You Uncomfortable, Even Those You Dislike

- If you are old, hire people who are young
- If you are young, hire people who are old
- Teach people the hazards of sameness and homosocial reproduction
- Newcomers bring in valuable new ideas, see things in new ways, and help the company break from the past
- If you hire people who prompt discomfort in yourself and others, take extra care to listen to their ideas and insist that others do so as well
- Warn people that they will find it frustrating and annoying to work with people who are "different" and teach them to cope with these negative feelings

Reward success and failure, punish inaction

There is a lot of talk in the press these days about the wonders of failure. Some stories make it sound as if the more mistakes you make, the richer you get. Management guru Tom Peters quotes everyone from Thomas Edison to Mary Kay Ash (the founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics) to show how people fail their way to success.[6] Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic and a frequent speaker on leadership, urges us to celebrate our mistakes. He reacts to his musicians' mistakes by exclaiming, "How fascinating!"[7]

While all this talk about the virtues of failure is convincing and inspiring, I hate when it actually happens to me and mine. I hate my own errors and screw-ups; they annoy and humiliate me. I hate when my family, friends, and colleagues fail; I feel bad for them and always think it is my fault. I don't even like when my enemies fail; I feel sorry for them and have an inexplicable urge to help and comfort them. Failure stinks. Unfortunately, every bit of solid theory and evidence demonstrates that it is impossible to generate a few good ideas without generating a lot of bad ones. If you want to eliminate mistakes, avoid dead ends, and succeed most of the time, you will drive out innovation. If a nonprofit wants to encourage people to keep generating new ideas, to test them in unbiased ways, and to avoid reverting to proven ideas and well-honed skills, rewarding success isn't enough; it has to reward failure as well, especially dead ends that teach new lessons and that enable people to have some fun along the way.

Duston says rewarding well-intended failure is not as easy as it sounds. For instance, this year, the symphony fell some $20,000 short of its fundraising goal at its annual gala. "We just had a big debrief on the gala, looking at how do we do it differently next year," she said. "But I can't say we reward the gala committee for falling short."

The problem is that rewarding only success discourages people from taking the risks required to import and test new ideas, to find new uses for old ideas, and to try new blends of old knowledge. If you want people to be innovative, you want them to spend their time dreaming up, refining, and testing unproven

Use "Happy Warriors" to Spark Innovation

- Hire upbeat people and do everything you can to keep them that way
- Teach people how to recognize the differences between interpersonal conflict and intellectual conflict
- Teach people – through classes, mentoring, and setting a good example – to build resistance to rejection and failure
- Avoid conflict of any kind during the earliest stages of the creative process, but encourage people to fight over ideas in the intermediate stages
- Encourage and teach people to use tasteful jokes to release tension when arguments over ideas start becoming too tense and personal
- If people continue to engage in nasty personal conflict despite efforts to teach them not to, fire them
- If people are upbeat and optimistic, but can't learn how to fight over ideas, they might be better off doing routine rather than creative work

– and thus mostly unsuccessful – ideas.

For Simon at RAFT, that process is a way of life. Simon's organization collects surplus pieces parts from local businesses and stores them, stacks of them, in a 36,000-square-foot San Jose warehouse. Spend a few minutes talking to Simon, and you quickly realize that one man's discardable "doodad" or "gizmo" can be a teacher's prized learning tool. Simon's 25 staffers spend their time coming up with ways to turn geegaws into usable tools for some 5,000 Bay area teachers. Thus, cardboard tubes become kaleidoscopes, rainsticks, pinhole cameras – even musical instruments. Every Saturday, the models are demonstrated at the warehouse for as many as 300 teachers.

RAFT's mission is not just to provide neat items for arts and crafts. It seeks to create games and toys that can be used to teach science and math. And when the trucks come in with new materials during the week, staff members often have only two or three days to think up interesting uses before teachers come and clean them out again.

Simon has come up with an internal system that assumes a certain amount of failure. Each Saturday, staff members conduct "Big 'D' Demos," illustrating how to make tried-and-true items like the kaleidoscopic cardboard tubes. But they also put on "Little 'd' demos," forums for untested experimentation. Sometimes, the Little d demos fail, as when Simon created a counting dice game for first-graders out of a plastic grid and markers. ("It was rather boring," she admitted.) But other times they come up with creative wonders. Recently, a local candle company moved and donated all its excess wax. Staff members figured out that if they poured different color wax into pie tins, sprinkled a smattering of Silicon Valley pieces parts, and then poured another color wax on top – repeating the process to create several "layers" – they could create a crude archaeological pie. Chipping through the wax, students could "unearth" computer chips and see the fossilized impressions in the layer below. "It's like a big dig in Silicon Valley," Simon said. Local science teachers snapped up the demo for budding paleontologists, grades five through eight.

Simon says that for every truly useful teaching tool they create, they have many failures. "If you wait until you come up with the best, then you might get two to three a month," she says. "But if you come up with 100 ideas a month, you may get eight to 10 good ones. Out of quantity, a few good ones rise to the top."

I am not saying that your nonprofit should reward people who are stupid, lazy, or incompetent. You should reward smart failures, not dumb failures. And if you want a creative organization, inaction is the worst kind of failure. Researcher Dean Keith Simonton provides strong evidence that creativity, more than anything else, results from action rather than inaction. In every occupation he studied, including composers, artists, poets, inventors, and scientists, the story is the same: Creativity is a function of the quantity of output.[8] His research shows that "those segments of a creator's career when the most hits emerge will also usually be the same periods that see the most misses as well," and "the quality ratio neither increases nor decreases as the creator gains more experience or maturity."[9]

There is mounting evidence that groups that avoid interpersonal conflict – and stick to intellectual conflict – are more effective, especially at creative work

Research on creative output shows that we can't tell which new ideas will succeed and which will fail at the outset, and that creativity is largely a function of sheer quantity. These findings mean that whether people are doing something – or nothing – is one of the best metrics for assessing people who do creative work, and the evidence indicates that inaction is the worst failure, perhaps the only kind of failure that deserves to be punished if you want to encourage innovation. If you want innovation, you need to reward people who act – even if they are acting outside of traditional job boundaries.

Innovate by Rewarding Success and Failure, and Punishing Inaction

- Monitor and reward failures and take time to talk about what was learned
- If people have a low failure rate, look for signs that they are not taking enough risks or are hiding – rather than helping others learn from – their mistakes
- Promote and hire people who have had intelligent failures, and tell people in the company this is one of the reasons they have been given important jobs
- Forgive and remember mistakes, don't forgive and forget
- Talk about failures to signal that it is expected and desirable to do so. Use every tool you have – praise, jokes, stories, money, promotions, demotions, even firings – to convey that the failure to act is the greatest failure of all
- Remember and learn from the mistakes made by other companies and teams, not just your own

Lagoria, director of the Contemporary Museum in Honolulu, has taken this idea to its practical extreme. The contemporary art museum, with a full-time staff of 25, needs to get its creative spark from all quarters. When the first anniversary of September 11 came around, it was the museum's accountant who stepped forward with the most innovative idea: Make the museum interactive on that day. Museum directors ran with the idea, establishing a space where visitors could create sculpture, and having the docents in the gallery engage guests in conversation. "You wouldn't expect to get this from the accounting manager," Lagoria says, "but especially in a small nonprofit, you don't pigeonhole people by their title. We reward anyone who wants to come to the table to contribute." In other words, anyone who wants to act should be rewarded for it. In this case, Lagoria rewarded the accountant by publicly acknowledging him at a management meeting and welcoming his ideas – even those relating to the art on the floor. "He's going to be a part of that conversation," Lagoria says. "He brings a fresh voice unweighted down by ... worries about show deadlines. In some ways, he represents our audience."

The idea of rewarding action, even when it fails, is one that managers like to talk about. Yet while they know and may talk about the virtues of a high failure rate, it is harder for many managers to actually reward failed risk taking.

David Roche, executive director at the Old Town School of Folk Music, a community arts school in Chicago, is one manager who rewards those who fail forward. Take just one example. Last year, the principal of a local elementary school approached Old Town, suggesting a novel partnership for an extensive music education program. Old Town's director of educational outreach loved the idea, and pushed the program aggressively. The nonprofit's commitment went far beyond what it had ever done in the past. "We offered whatever they needed musically," said Roche. "Percussion classes, chorus, guitar class. We responded to need."

Unfortunately, Roche said, the pilot project fell apart. There was little buy-in from teachers and insufficient administrative preparation. "We were doing things on an ad hoc basis, shooting from the hip," Roche said. Old Town lost some $30,000 it had invested in creating a sustainable partnership – not to mention the cost in terms of planning, personnel, and human capital. There was fallout in the community as well when the program was drastically scaled back.

And yet Roche promptly promoted the director, giving him more responsibility, more personnel, and a salary increase. Why? Roche wanted to reward the director's passion and his tireless effort on behalf of the program that cut across the entire staff. "He was dying when the pilot went down," Roche said. The failure also yielded real-life lessons about the kind of organizational follow-through that is necessary for success. And perhaps most importantly, Roche wanted to encourage the director, as well as others, to keep coming up with good pilot ideas.

"We want to reward people who are willing to take chances," Roche said. "They may be overly ambitious because they want a lot, but at the same time we don't want to curb that. We can shape it."

As many of our nonprofit leaders acknowledged, failure is inevitable, so you might as well use smart mishaps as teaching tools, rewarding intelligent effort so that employees remain willing to take risks for the sake of innovation.

"The plane can go down and it's okay," Roche said. "We'll save the pilot and try something else." □

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