

Make money from ideas: Start by banning the clipart light bulb

My heart always used to sink when, as a young engineer, I heard the words “Here’s the idea. Just go implement it”

The more experience I got, the more I realised that I was absolutely right in my feeling that this wasn’t the way to do it: If you actually want to see value from ideas, their generation and implementation need to be intimately entwined.

There’s a very common (but unhelpful) myth that “Big Hairy Great Ideas” emerge fully formed in a Eureka Moment and then just need a little handle turning to implement them.

It’s interesting to look at how this myth arose:

Stories of great inventions tend to focus on this Eureka Moment and the flash of illumination. This is understandable because it makes a good story. When one experiences a Eureka Moment, the feeling of the transition from uncertainty into clarity is almost orgasmic. This “light bulb” image of creativity is an integral part of most people’s idea of what creativity is. They recognise that their own ideas don’t emerge fully formed and perfect, but unfortunately, rather than recognising the inadequacy of the myth, deem that this means that they themselves are not really creative.

This rather simplistic view of creativity is only reinforced by Microsoft’s wretched clipart light bulb. During my work, I see a lot of presentations on creativity and its very noticeable how use of the clip art correlates with enthusiasm rather expertise.

The belief that good ideas just need a little handle turning to implement them is particularly prevalent in organisations that cope with creativity by corralling it into workshops and away-days. With a good facilitator, these can be very effective. The problem is that many facilitators have very little experience of the rest of the innovation process. They help clarify the vision, build up the energy and create some great ideas, but assume that the job is then done. Everyone has the glow of satisfaction that comes with having a clear vision for the way forward. The light bulb analogy feels right. The facilitator then goes home and glows happily. A project team is formed and told “Here’s an idea, go implement it”

The project team then starts to try to implement the idea. They find that they’re getting push back from the rest of the organisation. People raise objections. Problems arise.

If the organisation is inexperienced at innovation, there is a real risk that the project team will try to stick rigidly to the original idea and will then be blamed for being unable to make it work.

If the team and their managers are experienced in innovation, they realise that this is normal, and devote their energies to tapping useful expertise, engaging others, morphing the idea and pushing it forward in pursuit of the fundamental vision. This will give them a much better chance of success, so that with luck, they ultimately arrive at a solution that meets a real user need and makes real money: In Marketing Speak, “it offers a compelling value proposition.” This will be related to the original seed idea, but is very unlikely to be identical to it.

The myth machine now rolls into action, and creates post-rationalised story about how the innovation was developed. The struggles, blind alleys and creativity that went into the implementation are smoothed away. They no longer exist. The Myth of the Eureka Moment rides on.

The process of harnessing creativity and using it to produce valuable innovation is a fascinating and multifaceted subject. There's never going to be a universal, quick fix solution that will make an organisation creative.

Nevertheless, if you are looking for a simple way to start the process, one easy thing to do is to ban the clipart light bulb!

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