



AIA Best Practices: Create a process for developing great ideas

Contributed by the editors of AIArchitect

Summary

Jeffrey Cufaude, a consultant, held a two-hour workshop with AIA national component staff to demonstrate how experiential learning produces great ideas. He showed how firms can maximize organizational creativity by understanding the experiential learning cycle, striking a balance between compliance versus creation, and recognizing relationships that generate creativity.

Background

Jeffrey Cufaude, principal and partner of Idea Architects, an Indianapolis-based consulting firm, opened a discussion with two dozen AIA national component staff members by asking them to think of a great idea each had had and to write down two or three lessons they learned from that experience on how to produce great ideas.

The idea behind the two-hour session was to show by example the concepts of experiential learning; the importance of balancing compliance and creation within an organization; the elements of idea inspiration, development, and implementation; and Cufaude's 10 practical pointers for creating an organization that inspires great ideas.

The experiential learning cycle

Using David A. Kolb's model of experiential learning, Cufaude listed the four elements of learning from experience. The starting point is to think of a concrete experience. In this case, the experience was the participants' previous great ideas.

The second step is observation and reflection (including those from external sources). For this stage, Cufaude has people call out one of their lessons learned from their "personal best idea-generation experiences." (Such group idea sharing, although expeditious, favors extroverts, he observed, which typically means that the talent and potential contributions of 30 % of the group—introverts—are not likely to be expressed.)

Kolb's third step is forming abstract concepts and generalizations (lessons learned). For that experience, individuals record "lessons others share that I want to remember" as group discussion takes place.

The fourth step—the subject of an exercise later in the morning’s program—is to test the concepts and generalizations in new situations, thus creating a new concrete experience and a repetition of the experiential learning cycle.

Compliance versus creation

One continuum of organizational cultures of innovation, developed by Tom McGehee, emphasizes compliance on one end and creation on the other. A compliance organization, Cufaude explained, is like a fixed, machine-like world, driven by policy, rules, and patterned organization. It is internally focused, meaning the good of the organization prevails over the good of the individual. A creative organization is more like a random, weather-like world, he said, driven by principles, relationships, and emergent organization. It is externally focused, meaning the good of the organization is predicated on the good of the individual.

One type of organization is neither better nor worse than the other, as each has its own productivity pluses and minuses, Cufaude said. But when it comes to idea generation, the companies with at least some elements of creation culture will succeed, he argued, citing McGehee’s book *Whoosh: Business in the Fast Lane* (2001):

PULL QUOTE: When people are free to choose their own path to a goal, they do their best work. What are you doing as a leader, manager, team member, to those around you? Are you boxing others in so tight that compliance is all they see? Or are you giving them the freedom to maximize themselves and the organization?

Relationships that generate creativity

Using nine concepts, illustrated with sketches, session participants broke into groups of two or three for five-minute brainstorming sessions, after which each group reported its thoughts:

- Common ground allows you to take risks. In group interaction, determine common goals first and build on that common ground. Diversity doesn’t preclude commonality.
- From chaos comes opportunity. On the other hand, people have personal chaos comfort levels. Creating chaos as an idea-generating tactic may be detrimental to the group dynamic.
- Experiment. Try many different things. Hypothesize a “what if?” Test it, gather results, and determine whether the results are replicable. Lessons learned and ideas generated from failure may lead to successes elsewhere.
- Leaders must strike a balance between control and letting go. Accept ideas from others and react appropriately to move toward the overarching goal.
- Build on commonalities and introduce differences. Reflect on the common goals and work from commonalities as well as uniqueness.
- Encourage everyone to broaden their perspectives. Recognize as an organization that everybody has a piece of the truth.

- Search for opportunities. Instead of looking for innovation that derives entirely from momentary need, look outside and reflect holistically on the universe of opportunities that exist.
- Leaders may want to step outside the situation to understand. Hang back from the group and just watch whenever you sense you may be dominating the group dynamic.
- Disturbances are one of our primary sources of creativity.

Ten practical pointers from idea architects

In his wrap-up, Cufaude shared these leadership principles for consistently moving toward a culture of innovation and inspiration of great ideas:

- encourage, reward, and sustain experimentation
- see and seek connections in seemingly unrelated things
- search for inspiration in unlikely places or sources
- foster a culture of collaboration and conversation
- slow down and block time to reflect and make sense of things
- think in ideals first, followed by the realities
- break boundaries, challenge conventions, question norms
- always ask why; constantly connect activity to purpose
- generate a quantity of ideas, then sort through them for quality
- know a little about a lot versus a lot ab

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This article corresponds to:

Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition Unit 1 - The Profession
 Chapter 05 – Organizational Development
 Section 04 – Firm Growth and Development: How to Build a Creative Culture