

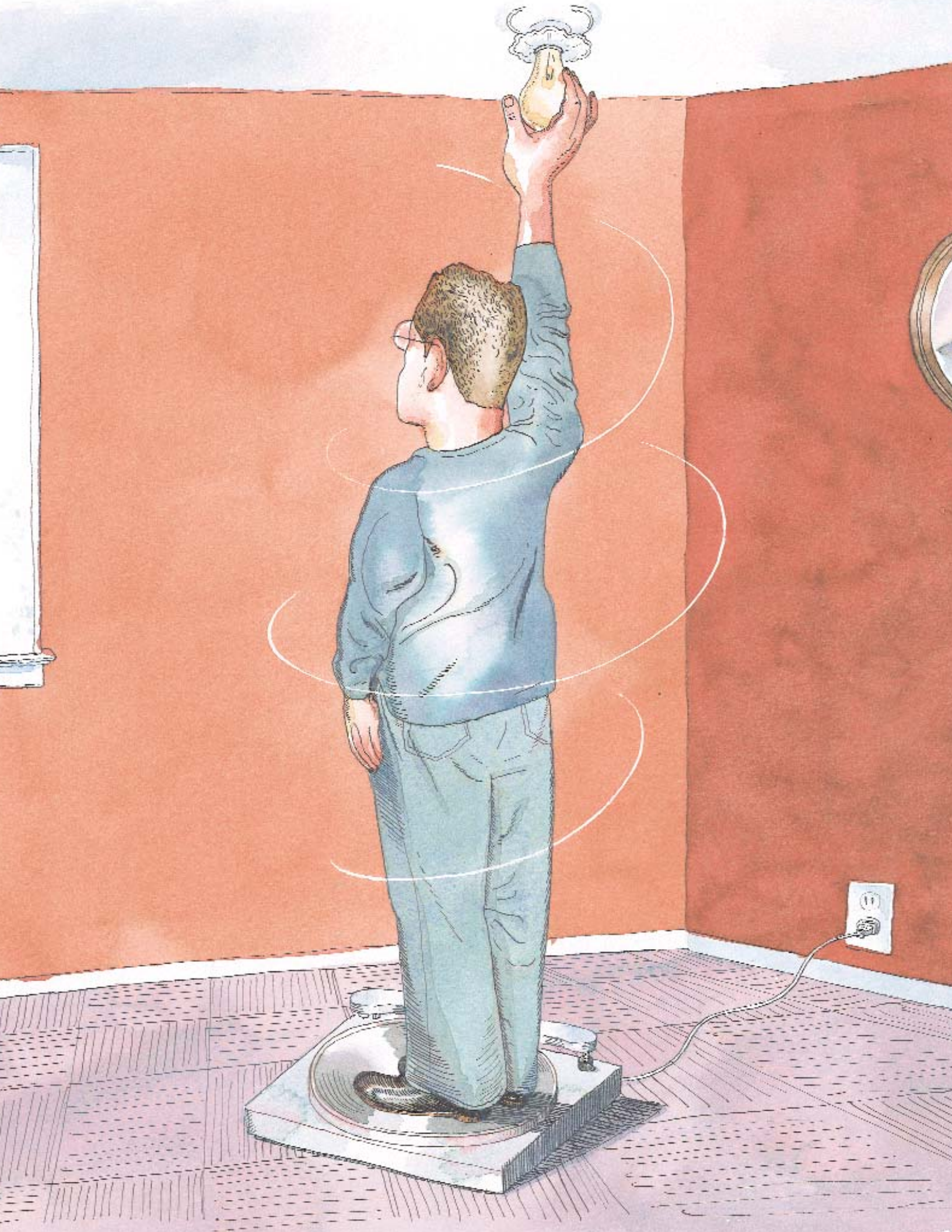
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“When you know that
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which road to take,
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—Robert Sutton
professor at Stanford Engineering School

Weird Ideas That Work*

Do you need a fresh start on creativity? Stanford professor **Robert Sutton** is a unique voice with an urgent message about how to generate and capitalize on new ideas. *Bonus points: How many weird ideas does it take to screw in a lightbulb? By Polly LaBarre Illustrations by Barry Blitt



We hold these truths to be self-evident:

We recruit people who are quick on the uptake, people whom we like and need. We encourage coworkers to get along. We make decisions based on experience. Now flip those assumptions upside down. Hire slow learners, people whom you dislike and don't need. Encourage them to defy and fight with their managers and peers. Think of ridiculous things to do, and do them.

As management practices go, these sound wrong—even weird. According to Robert Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford Engineering School, they're some of the most powerful practices for generating and capitalizing on new ideas. "What's weird," says Sutton, "is that people say that they want innovation, yet they can't depart from their deeply ingrained beliefs and practices about how to treat people, make decisions, and structure work."

During an illustrious career as a teacher and consultant, Sutton has distilled a kind of antiwisdom about innovation. He is codirector of Stanford's Center for Work, Technology and Organization, and he has worked with a range of companies, including Clorox, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, IDEO, and McKinsey & Co. In his provocative and relentlessly useful new book, *Weird Ideas That Work: 11 1/2 Practices for Promoting, Managing, and Sustaining Innovation* (Free Press, 2001), Sutton presents a slew of tactics and strategies for bridging the innovation gap. "A weird idea works because it trips discomfort," says Sutton. "The idea is to flip from autopilot to mindful creation."

In conversations with FAST COMPANY, Sutton discussed the ideas behind his weird ideas and described how innovative people and teams bring fresh eyes to bear on every challenge.

DON'T GET TOO WEIRD TOO FAST

Before you start getting weird, there's a major caveat. During the past several years, we got so frenzied about innovation that we overstated the notion that innovation is fun and desirable and that routine work is boring and not as valuable. A few management gurus who shall remain nameless did a real disservice to the business world with their exhortations that *everyone* should innovate *all the time!* That's my idea of hell.

The mantra that we have all lived with for the past five years is, "Innovate or die!" But it's just as accurate to say, "Innovate *and* die." All the excitement about all things new obscured the fact that most new ideas are bad and most old ideas are good.

It's a Darwinian principle: The death rate of new products and companies is dramatically higher than that of old ones. Dozens of new cereals fail every year, while Cheerios and Wheaties persist. Even wildly popular new products such as Beanie Babies fade, while Play-Doh remains on the scene. Still, the world does change, new technologies are developed, business models do mutate, and customer demands do migrate. So the question becomes, Which horn would you rather be gored by? That's the innovator's dilemma. You can't choose between innovative work and routine work. That's like asking, What's more important: your heart or your brain?

The best companies organize themselves around two useful fictions. Routine work is guided by the assumption that everything is a permanent condition. Decisions are made and work is structured as if the future will be a perfect imitation of the past. That's how Intel dominates the chip industry. When Intel managers agree that something is a good idea, they use their "Copy Exactly" technique to implement it identically in every Intel factory around the world.

On the other hand, the organizing principle for innovative work is to treat everything like a temporary condition. The fiction of innovation is one of supreme urgency—think Andy Grove's paranoia of disruptive change. The key is to create some kind of switching mechanism or signal system to guide work through the use of both approaches. People at Intel shift from being in Copy Exactly mode to the domain of generating and wrestling with ideas by using their "constructive-confrontation" process. In one breath, Mary Murphy-Hoye, Intel's director of IT strategy and technology, will exhort the troops, "If we're not failing 10 times more than we're succeeding, it means that we're not taking enough risks." In the next, she'll emphasize the importance of Copy Exactly.

THE STRANGE (BUT SIMPLE) TRUTH ABOUT CREATIVITY

The truth is, creativity isn't about wild talent as much as it's about productivity. To find a few ideas that work, you need to try a lot that don't. It's a pure numbers game. More specifically, it's about variance. When innovation is the goal, organizations need massive variation in what people do, think about, and produce. Artistic geniuses don't necessarily have a higher success rate than other creators; they simply *do more*—and they do a range of *different*

* Weird incentives: the ferret and stick



that work,



Want Innovation?

5 1/2 Weird Practices That Work

If you want to fill your company with great ideas, fill it with great people. And that, according to Stanford professor Robert Sutton, means welcoming weird people. Here are 5 1/2 ways to do it.

Weird Idea #1 Hire slow learners of the organizational code. Specifically, hire people with a special kind of stupidity or stubbornness—who avoid, ignore, or reject how things are “supposed to be done around here.” Surround those slow learners with fast learners who understand how to promote their creative ideas.

Weird Idea #1 1/2 Hire people who make you uncomfortable—even those whom you dislike. Once you’ve hired people who prompt discomfort, take extra care to listen to their ideas.

Weird Idea #2 Hire people whom you (probably) don’t need. Interview and occasionally hire interesting or strange people with skills that your company doesn’t need at the moment—and might never need. Then ask them how they can help you. You might be surprised.

Weird Idea #3 Use job interviews to get new ideas, not just to screen candidates. Job interviews are a weak way to select employees. Still, there is a little-known benefit: They provide the opportunity to learn something new. Give job candidates problems that you can’t solve. Listen as much as you can. Talk as little as you can.

Weird Idea #4 Encourage people to ignore superiors and peers. Hire defiant outsiders. Rather than teaching newcomers about company history or procedure, have the newcomers teach the old-timers how to think and act. Encourage people to drive you crazy by doing what they think is right rather than what they are told.

Weird Idea #5 Find happy people, and let them fight. If you want innovation, you need upbeat people who know the right way to battle. Avoid conflict during the earliest stages of the creative process, but encourage people to fight over ideas in the intermediate stages.

things. They have more successes and more failures. That goes for teams and companies too.

Personally, I think failure stinks. But the fact is, every bit of evidence demonstrates that it is *impossible* to generate a few good ideas without generating a lot of bad ideas. The thing about creativity is that you can’t tell at the outset which ideas will succeed and which will fail. So the only thing you can do is try to fail faster in order to move on to the next idea. Now, leaders pay a lot of lip service to the notion of rewarding failure, but few organizations hold failed effort on the same level with success. Often, they have a forgive-and-forget policy. Forgiveness is crucial, but it’s not enough. In order to learn from mistakes, it’s even more important to forgive and *remember*. The only kind of failure that deserves to be punished is *inaction*.

There’s another unspoken truth about creativity: It isn’t so much about original creation as it is about using old ideas in new ways, places, and combinations. Henry Miller said it best: “All geniuses are leeches.” IDEO, which is probably one of the most purely innovative companies in the world, has designed more than 4,000 products and worked with firms in dozens of industries. Its designers are constantly importing, mixing, and matching a vast range of technologies, products, and design tricks to produce new solutions. One group got the idea to create a “slit valve” for a bicycle water bottle out of a heart valve that was made for a medical-products company. Another designer took a cheap motor from a Chatty Cathy doll and fitted it to a docking station for an Apple laptop.

The most creative organizations in any industry cultivate a *vu ja de* mentality of seeing old things in new ways. The ability to keep shifting opinions and perceptions is crucial to creativity. It includes a capacity to switch from foreground to background, to think of things that are usually assumed to be negative as positive (and vice versa) and to reverse assumptions about cause and effect. It means switching off the autopilot and looking at every challenge, project, and task with fresh eyes.

FREAKS, GEEKS, AND FRESH EYES

The best way to bring fresh eyes to any problem is to bring in new kinds of people. When it comes to innovation, no one is too weird for the room. It starts with whom and how you hire. There are a few very effective methods for finding useful misfits who will increase

To find a few ideas you need to try a lot that don't.

variance in what people think, say, and do. First, recruit slow learners of the organizational code. Hire people with a special kind of stupidity, who ignore or reject how things are “supposed to be done around here.” Second, hire people who make you uncomfortable—even people whom you actively dislike. Don't seek out those who are rude, insulting, or incompetent. But if you find a candidate who seems talented yet has different beliefs, knowledge, and skills than most insiders, then negative emotional reactions are reasons *in favor* of hiring the person. Such people often scout out new trends and directions for the company.

A final point about slow learners, loners, and agitators: They only add value if you surround them with fast learners and managers who can protect them and translate them to the organization. Creativity is a social process—it doesn't work without that interplay. Look at Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize winner in physics. He had little interest in what others did or expected him to do. He wouldn't write any grants, and he refused to go to faculty meetings. A collection of his autobiographical essays was titled, *What Do You Care What Other People Think?: Further Adventures of a Curious Character*. He only had the resources to focus on his own discoveries because his colleagues took care of all that other work.

PRACTICE RANDOM ACTS OF WEIRDNESS

When you know that you need to head in a new direction, but you don't know which road to take, sometimes the best thing is to do whatever is most ridiculous or random. Thinking up the dumbest and most impractical things that you can do is a powerful way to explore your assumptions about the world. When you get people talking about products, services, and business practices that they believe are misguided, dumb, or even destructive, it can help bring the beliefs of the group into broad relief and crystallize what the company should be doing. In my consulting work with a professional-services firm, we developed a list of the worst characteristics of several key competitors. In the process, the firm's leaders found that they exhibited some of those characteristics themselves, and they set out to change them. By the same token, generating ridiculous ideas can invite questions rather than give

confirmation about what a company knows and does.

Another good reason to explore outrageous ideas is that they have the least competition in the marketplace. The Palm is a great example of this: Conventional wisdom (and venture capitalists) decreed that the handheld, pen-based computer was a failed concept. Jeff Hawkins and Donna Dubinsky went ahead in spite of the skepticism, and their competitors lost a lot of time discounting their success while the Palm device and operating system took hold in the marketplace.

Jeff and Donna were optimists—and optimism really matters. We are so bad at predicting which new ideas will succeed and which will fail that sometimes the only practical thing to do is to encourage people to keep trying. The challenge for leaders is not only to hire and fund people who will be wrong most of the time about their wacky, deviant ideas, but also to know when they *aren't* wrong. There is one simple, proven, and powerful thing that you can do to increase the odds that a risky project will succeed: Convince yourself and everyone else that, with determination and persistence, the idea is destined to be a triumph. Some 500 studies on self-fulfilling prophecies demonstrate that confidence—even misguided confidence—helps people perform better.

On the other hand, the only thing that is more important than optimism is the capacity to pull the plug on a bad idea. The pharmaceutical company Novartis has a general policy of putting money on the table for each individual on a drug-development team who halts a development project. It's not

a huge amount of money—just enough to act as a countering force to the natural tendency to escalate commitment to a failing course of action. When it comes to innovation, the winning

leadership attitude is a blend of cynicism and belief. Innovative people and organizations demonstrate tremendous conviction and passion when they're exploring new ideas, yet they also have the ability and instincts to move on to the next new thing. The key to sustainable success is not having the ability to invent new stuff; it's having the capacity to keep inventing new ways of thinking and behaving. ★

Polly LaBarre (plabarre@fastcompany.com) is a FAST COMPANY senior editor based in New York. Contact **Robert Sutton** by email (bobsut@stanford.edu).



F S T C M N Y C M

Ideas on the Move

The best ideas are those that get shared. Read, download (in PDF format), or comment on this article, or send it to a friend.

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RELATED RESOURCES

1. Robert Sutton says that you have to hire people you may not like to create an environment that promotes creativity and success. But how can you do that and still teach your new employees the rules of the road? In an excerpt from our article [Attention Class!!! 16 Ways to Be a Smarter Teacher](http://www.fastcompany.com/online/53/teaching.html) (www.fastcompany.com/online/53/teaching.html), University of Michigan Business School professor Noel Tichy offers some insight into teaching your employees how to think—by letting them think (and learn) for themselves.

You're teaching people how to think. The last thing you want to do is stand up and tell people what to do. Or give them the answers that you want to hear. The best instructors are less interested in the answers than in the thinking behind them. What leaders have to offer is a "teachable point of view," says Noel Tichy, a professor at the University of Michigan Business School and author of *The Leadership Engine: How Winning Companies Build Leaders at Every Level* (HarperBusiness, 1997). It's how leaders look at the world, interpret information, and think through problems. The best teaching leaders help people learn how to think on their own rather than telling them what to think.

"You want a forceful group of people who know what you want but at the same time feel free enough to make the day-to-day judgments themselves," says Gene Roberts, a longtime editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *New York Times* who now teaches journalism at the University of Maryland at College Park. (During his 18 years at the *Inquirer*, the paper won 17 Pulitzer Prizes.) "You have to know when to let go so that people don't become dependent on you. In the newspaper business, speed is everything, and if you have people waiting to hear what you have to say before they will react, you'll get beat."

2. According to Stanford professor Robert Sutton, successful enterprises need two main things: a diverse team of people with a variety of skills and abilities, and the ability to let go of ideas that don't work. But do companies that embrace this method really work? Read an excerpt from our article [Creative Secrets of the SEALs](http://www.fastcompany.com/online/39/creativesecrets.html) (www.fastcompany.com/online/39/creativesecrets.html) to find out more about Scott Ault, BRC Imagination Arts' vice president of creative development and chief SEAL, and how his company uses strange ideas—and tactics—to get ahead.

Love your ideas—then lose them. Thick skin is an important quality for a BRC SEAL. As the SEALs refine ideas, the group isn't shy about eliminating the ones that don't seem to be serving the overall theme and objectives. "When people first come in, a lot of them have this feeling that 'it's my idea, and I need to protect it at all costs,'" Scott Ault says. "As they mature, they figure out that this is a group effort. If we want to produce something good, people have to get used to hearing a lot of 'nope, that's not it' and 'that doesn't speak to me.'"

Difference is power. The best ideas come from a very heterogeneous mix of people, Ault says. One of the SEALs has a master's degree in visual anthropology and has worked as a documentary filmmaker; another SEAL has illustrated comic books; one member, Christian Lachel, actually served in the Navy's elite SEALs unit; and Ault produced television commercials before joining BRC. All members of the group are comfortable juggling several projects simultaneously, though some of them cycle out of the creative-development group to see a project to completion. "Having to constantly come up with ideas can burn you out," Ault says. "It's almost a vacation to be able to work on a project long term, instead of having to hold four or five or six projects in your head at one time."

Robert Sutton believes that leaders need to hire innovative thinkers to succeed—even if they don't like them. But what happens when your boss doesn't know that hiring an oddball could be the best thing for the company? In our article [Trickle-Up Leadership](http://www.fastcompany.com/online/52/useem.html) (www.fastcompany.com/online/52/useem.html), Michael Useem offers advice on helping your boss—and you—realize leadership potential.

Which company has done the most to embrace the concept of upward leadership? The answer, says management professor Michael Useem, is General Electric. "GE has an extremely hard-hitting culture," says Useem. "But everyone is expected to challenge their leaders, even if it means challenging Jack Welch himself." To encourage its people to lead up, GE launched a program for mentoring up.

For many years, GE had required veteran leaders to mentor the next generation of top talent. But two years ago, when Welch realized that the Web would change everything, he asked 600 of his worldwide executives to reach down into the ranks and pick younger, Webified people to teach them the ways of the Net.

In his new book, *Leading Up*, Useem quotes Welch: "E-business knowledge is generally inversely proportional to both age and height in the organization." Mentoring up, Welch says, was intended to "change that equilibrium." Welch himself led the charge by picking Pam Wickham, who ran GE's main Web site, to be his Net coach.

The one-on-one sessions did more than give executives a crash course on the Web. They demonstrated that leadership is a two-way street. "Mid-level managers reported that they had become more comfortable in feeding ideas upstairs and pressing their bosses to change," writes Useem. "Top-level managers reported they had become more comfortable in eliciting insights from below." Bottom line: Reverse mentoring gets people to challenge their leaders—and it helps leaders do a better job of leading.