Stanford eCorner

Two Weird Ideas That Work

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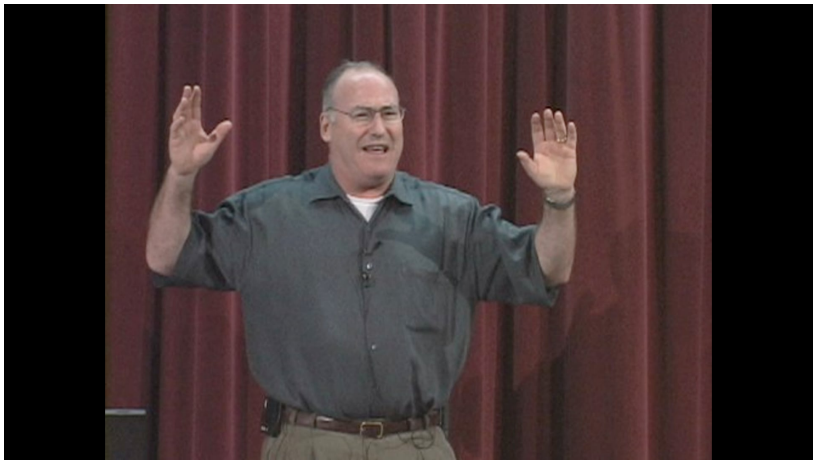
Sutton illustrates two examples from his book "Weird Ideas that Work." He encourages people to ignore and defy superiors and peers, and suggests trying to learn anything from people who say they have solved the same problems you face.



Transcript

The basic way that I came up with the weird ideas that work for that book was that I looked to see what the research evidence in theory was and then I looked to see which ideas would enhance variation, vuja de and breaking from the past and I came up with a set of ideas and stated them in such a way that they might just be a little bit annoying or at least sound weird.. And just to give you a feeling for them, what I'll do is I'll give you two of them so you can think about this.. The first one is to encourage people to ignore and defy superiors and peers.. Now this is a good illustration of the difference between the logic of routine work and creative work if somebody is flying the airplane you're on or you're having the surgical procedure done on you, you don't want people ignoring the head surgeon or the head pilot.. But if in the situation you want creativity, you want variation, then there's an argument that this is a way to get it.. And in fact, when we look at survey research, there's a moderate amount of survey research that shows, that when you ask what kind of supervisors will have the most creative workgroups, they tend to be people who devote less attention to the people who work for them and let them break the rules.. Conversely, when you when you go on and nominate who are your most creative, they're people who bend or break the rules and who ignore and defy authority, sort of like the Stanford faculty if you want an example of a group that acts like this.. So when you start going in industry, there's lots of cases, especially in Silicon Valley which I know best, where creativity has been done despite, rather than because of management.. Actually, when I first moved back to the Bay Area in 1983 was the Atari Corporation.. Atari was very interesting because in the late '70s, it was acquired by a movie company, The Warner Brothers and all this people know about the gaming industry and they acquired it and they brought in these people from the movie industry and they told the game designers to stop designing games, and design things like programs of keeping tracks of recipes..

But what ended up happening was the game designers lied to their bosses about what they were working on, in which showed them sort of mock ups of programs of keeping track of recipes and bouncing their checkbook and the like.. And they kept designing games.. And at the back of that defiance, at least a little while until they got another trouble.. Atari was this enormously successful company.. And if you look at the history of gaming by the way where there's sort of illegitimate aspect to it, you can see this is Microsoft as well for the folks who designed DirectX that makes playing games possible, then often, it's often it's an unauthorized sort of way.. There's lots of organizations that if you start looking at creative organizations, they have sort of official policies or procedures that enable this to happen.. Sort of management by looking the other way or management by getting out of the way.. 3Ms had the 15% rule for years and if you're in a technical job, you do work, 15% of your work doesn't have to be authorized.. Amazon, 3M, now Google, all sort of have work practices that encourage that.. And my favorite example from Silicon Valley history though, comes from Chuck House..

And Chuck House is this kind of interesting guy who is actually still around.. He actually works for Intel now because his start-up got acquired.. This about 1969 and Chuck was working in on a oscilloscope and was actually told directly by David Packard himself to stop working on a dumb idea and to do something else.. And what Chuck House instead, it was instead of listening of listening to David Packard, he said that instead of going on a vacation.. And what he actually did was he drove around the country and got a couple million dollars worth of orders for the oscilloscope.. In the 1969, a couple of million of dollars was real money and the result was they made it a successful product.. And then in 1981, Chuck House, he got an award from David Packard.. I forgot exactly what it says: Extraordinary contempt and defiance beyond the normal call of engineering.. And Tom Byers and I have seen his resume.. It's on his resume..

So this is idea sort of Packard realizing he had to encourage that kind of thing in the culture.. And let me just go through to one more.... I'll make sure to leave a good fifteen or so minutes for discussion.. But another one, which is one of the, one's that's sort of more out there is not to try to learn anything from people who say they've solved the problems you face.. I'm a great believer in expertise, and in fact, I'll talk about that in a minute.. But if you want to bring some sort of varied ideas in the different perspective of your organization, there's a good argument for bringing in an ignorant people and people who know about other things because they're not biased by what's right in the industry and what the solution is.. And to give you, one of the more famous examples, you've all heard of Jane Goodall who got famous studying chimpanzees in the wild.. She was hired by the famous anthropologist Louis Leakey, and he trained her in field observation methods.. She was a young undergraduate and what she said to Louis Leakey, "What I want to do is I want to read the literature now on chimpanzees because I'm going to be spending the years of my life studying them in the wild." Louis Leakey wouldn't let her read the literature because it would bias what she saw and didn't see.. So in our times when ignorance is very valuable and I'm not somebody who says that ignorance should be down all the time..

I think that sort of ignorance and knowledge are sort of tag team partners in life...