

MURDER BOARD

"What is called foreknowledge cannot be elicited from spirits, nor from gods, nor by analogy with past events, nor from calculations. It must be obtained from men who know the enemy situation."

SUN TZU

Look at the surf pounding on any beach. It is never exactly the same twice, nor will it ever be. The waves typify the infinitude of individualism in our universe.

For instance, no two people will give you the same opinion, in the same words, with the same emotions and beliefs about an idea. In the figure in the margin, one person may see a fish as large as a man, something to be cautious of. Another may see one as small as a dinner plate, something to eat.

Some people make the false assumption that anyone can dissect an idea and determine its true worth. If you believed the person who sees a fish only as a small thing, you would be misled; if you believed the person who sees a fish only as a large thing, you would also be misled. If you listened to both, you would consider the possibility that fish can be both large and small. This is why it is so important to get feedback about your ideas from many people.

Different people can help you modify and improve the initial idea. It's like sculpting: You start with a big block of marble and an idea. Others can suggest what parts of the block can be removed or discover cracks that you must take into account before you start sculpting. They might also offer suggestions as to how your idea for a sculpture might be improved or modified, suggestions that you may or may not take. Then you carve the remaining marble into a final shape.



Feedback is essential to the nurturing and critical development of ideas. It helps you look more closely and critically at your ideas.

Feedback is used to:

- Compare many different ideas to narrow down the field to one (or a few) of the most promising possibilities.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of an idea.
- Suggest modifications and improvements that will sharpen the idea.
- Determine business opportunities, or lack of them, for the idea.
- Identify marketing opportunities as well as marketing concerns.
- Determine the level of interest in the idea.

One of the CIA's favorite techniques for the critical analysis of ideas is the Murder Board. A Murder Board is a special group of selected individuals that evaluates and criticizes ideas before they are presented for final approval and implementation. The goals of the Murder Board are to:

- Terminate worthless ideas and proposals.
- Expose all the negative aspects of a viable idea so that corrective actions can be taken before final evaluation and implementation.
- Provide feedback.

The group critiques the idea as harshly as possible, attacking every weakness. If the idea has too many weaknesses, it goes no further. When the Board considers an idea viable, they suggest ways to modify or improve the idea to overcome each weakness.

The Board has saved the agency from considerable embarrassment over the years. For instance, many of the highly publicized anti-Castro plots such as poison cigars, powdered poison on his uniforms, drugs to render him impotent or make his hair fall out, and so on were terminated by the agency's Murder Boards.

The CIA adopted this technique from its predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services. The OSS was awash with ideas during World War II, including one idea from behaviorist B. F. Skinner. He suggested using pigeons to control guided missiles, as pigeons could be conditioned to peck continuously for four or five minutes at the image of a target on a screen. The birds would then be placed in a nose of a missile, harnessed in front of a similar screen. The idea was that the pigeons would peck the moving image on the

screen producing corrective signals to keep the missile on course. Skinner's idea was never used in actual warfare. The problem, according to the OSS, was that the members of the Murder Board couldn't stop laughing long enough to take the idea seriously.

Creating your own personal Murder Board is an excellent way to get feedback about ideas.

BLUEPRINT

1. *Verbalize the idea to your significant other or a trusted friend.* Sounding out the idea in detail with someone close to you will help clarify the idea, brighten its virtues, and expose its flaws. You need someone who is not afraid to tell the emperor he has no clothes. You need someone who is close to you so that he or she is not afraid to be honest.
2. *Detail your idea in writing.* Type up a detailed proposal, using graphics and illustrations if necessary. State your goals, your assumptions, your concerns, areas where you need information, your beliefs, what inspired the idea, and why you want others to evaluate it.

State why you want feedback: Is it to decide the worth of the idea, determine its strengths and weaknesses, compare it to other products, plan funding, business opportunities, and marketing, or what?

Your proposal should also list the questions you need answered. Remember that the questions themselves can stimulate creativity in others as they read your proposal. Emphasize that you are asking for feedback about your idea so that you can make decisions about implementing, terminating, modifying, or improving it. Some common categories for questions are: need, cost, marketing, and feasibility.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Need

- Does the idea meet a real need?
- Should a need be created through promotional and advertising efforts?
- Who will resist?

- Does it sound like a good idea to you?
- Are there real benefits?
- Do you feel it is new and original?
- Do you think it is better than others on the market?
- Can you think of different variations of the idea?
- Can you offer alternative ideas?

Cost

- Is it worth producing or implementing?
- Will it provide enough benefit to outweigh the cost?
- How should it be financed?
- What immediate or short-range gains or results should be anticipated?
- What should the projected returns be?
- Do you feel the risk factors are acceptable?
- What are the economic factors—what necessary talent, time for development, investment, marketing costs—do you foresee?

Marketing

- How should it be marketed?
- What are some possible obstacles, objections, and concerns?
- Does it have natural sales appeal? How ready is the market for it? Can customers afford it? Will customers buy it?
- Is timing a factor?
- Are there possible user resistances or difficulties?
- What might go right?
- What might go wrong?
- Who should be involved?
- What special marketing programs can you imagine?
- What is the competition?

Feasibility

- Is the idea sound?
- What is the best thing that could happen?

- What is the worst thing that could happen?
 - What are the faults and limitations?
 - Do you feel the idea is original?
 - Will it work in actual practice?
 - What problems or difficulties do you think the idea might solve?
 - Do you think I have the resources?
 - How simple or complex will its execution or implementation be?
 - What is most likely to help me implement the idea?
 - What is most likely to hinder successful implementation?
 - Is it possible to make it happen? How soon?
3. *Appoint a Murder Board.* Seek out people in your network of friends, relatives, and coworkers who have a creative mindset or are knowledgeable about your idea's environment.

The perfect feedback person has good imagination, perception, vision, and is as cold-eyed and objective as a pawnbroker pricing a broken watch.

Select as many people as you wish and ask each for their help in providing you with feedback (it is probably best to approach them one at a time). How you involve people in your idea can make or break the Board's effectiveness. Give each person your written proposal and listen carefully to what they say, without judging. Encourage each person to articulate his or her thoughts as they ponder your proposal and to brainstorm with you for ways to improve your idea or its implementation. Play devil's advocate. If you get objections, make them tell you why they feel it won't work. Get specifics.

Make value judgments at a later date. The decision is ultimately yours no matter how positive or negative the feedback you receive. I worked with one fellow whose entire Board told him his idea wouldn't work. "It was incredible how everyone told me the idea sounded great, but it wasn't going to work," he said. "But they all had different reasons, so I ignored their advice." If they had all cited the same reason, he probably would have taken

them more seriously. As it was, he sold the rights to his invention for a huge sum of money.

There are any number of methods for obtaining feedback about your idea. You may choose a quantitative or qualitative approach, depending upon the idea, the purpose of the evaluation, and the style of analysis you prefer. For instance, if you prefer to mix the two approaches, you could assign a numerical value to each question. In the eight-factor approach that follows, you would ask people to assign a point value to the questions that reflects their opinion (the point spreads are completely subjective). This would quantify your idea's perceived strengths and weaknesses; you could then interview people on selected questions for more information or opinions.

Eight Factors

1. Did I communicate the idea completely and clearly?
(0-20 points)
2. Do you have interest in this idea?
(0-20 points)
3. Are there good market opportunities?
(0-20 points)
4. How good is the timing?
(0-5 points)
5. Do you feel I have the competence to implement this idea?
(0-10 points)
6. Is this a good application of my personal strengths?
(0-10 points)
7. Does my idea have good competitive advantages?
(0-5 points)
8. How unique is my idea?
(0-10 points)

Now you can look at total points for all eight factors, or focus on specific questions. For example, if your point total for marketing opportunities is 0, you would probably ask a lot more questions about the market or marketing opportunities.

One inventor developed a commercial hair dryer that could dry hair in five minutes. He used the eight-factor method and got a 0 for marketing

opportunities from hairdressers. The reason there was no market, he found out, was that stylists wanted slower dryers to keep patrons occupied for thirty minutes or so while they worked on other customers.

PMI

Edward de Bono, international authority on thinking, recommends using "PMI" to get people away from simply reacting to ideas and situations.

Subjects are asked to observe and list the pluses, minuses, and most interesting aspects of an idea or situation. The "most interesting" category is for all those things that are worth noting but do not fit under either "plus" or "minus."

PMI forces people into action, thinking, and focusing their attention in a specific direction rather than just reacting to an idea or situation.

A PMI list can help you:

- *Compare many different ideas and narrow them down to one or a few.* I know a sales manager who sends his staff several different sales strategies and asks them to do a PMI on each before he decides on a final strategy.
- *Focus objectively on the pluses and minuses of a proposition.* An inventor proposed a new hinged bottle top to make drug bottles "elder accessible." His friends did PMIs on this idea, and their feedback led him to a better idea. He decided to create a cap that works like a combination lock: turn right, turn left, lift off.
- *Make a decision about the worth of an idea.* An executive who had been arguing for weeks with his management team about an idea finally gathered everyone involved and asked them all to do a PMI. Once the problem had been laid out, a route could be chosen, and the matter was resolved in minutes.

OPUS

Opus is modeled after the market research technique used by TerraFirma AB, a Swedish research company that gets an amazing 92 percent response to its surveys.

Although you can certainly improvise, Opus seems to work best when you use a sleek, elegant-looking box, about 16 inches by 4 inches by 1 inch. The interior of the box should be divided into four compartments and contain a description of your idea, instructions for performing Opus, and about one hundred cards. On each card, type a statement of concern (not a question) about your idea.

Examples:

- I believe my product is superior to Brand X because . . .
- The major benefit is . . .
- I can produce this for a cost of . . .
- People will buy it because . . .
- The best way to market it is . . .
- I plan to finance it by . . .
- The problems it will solve are . . .
- I expect the following results . . .

You ask the respondent to put each card into one of the four compartments, labeled "agree," "partly agree," "disagree," or "no opinion." The cumulative results will give you a feel for how your idea will be received. You can reuse the box with several different people. It works because it's fast and easy to do, and most people enjoy doing this kind of physical survey.

An obscure artist had the idea to sell advertising space on his canvases. He had absolutely no idea whether this could work, so he used an Opus box to survey nightclubs, clothing boutiques, hair salons, art galleries, and trendy restaurants. He found that advertisers seemed happy to put up to \$1,000 for space on a painting.

He had been successful in selling these paintings, which are heavy on stylized images of celebrity idols, with as many as a dozen ads, presented in foot-square boxes, adorning both sides and the bottom of each canvas. One art collector calls them "the cutting edge." The demand for his work became so large that he hired a full-time salesperson to sell advertising space and is planning a solo exhibition.

DEVIL'S FOOD

Most people love to help others with their business ventures or challenges, and their cooperation and compassion can be invaluable to you in your quest for feedback. An ancient story illustrates the radical difference cooperation and compassion can make. A man who led a basically good life died and was assigned to Hell for a short time. He discovered that the main torture in Hell was that everyone was forced to eat with spoons that were longer than their arms. The condemned spent eternity in the midst of excellent food they couldn't eat. When he was finally transferred up to Heaven,

he found that the blessed were given the same spoons. In Heaven, however, no one went hungry because they fed each other.

An effective feedback system is one that works for you. A Murder Board is one way to get honest information and create an ongoing creative climate for modifying and improving ideas. Of course, advice and feedback mean nothing unless you listen to and evaluate them properly.

SUMMARY

When your idea feels final, implement it. Do not spend days, weeks, or months refining it. If you delay, you may find yourself in a situation like that of the Victorian portrait painter who chose not to seek immediate benefits from his talents. Instead, he spent years refining his craft and art until he finally reached a pitch of dazzling brilliance—just in time to be rendered obsolete by photography.