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**10 TIPS FOR FACILITATING
CONVERSATION ABOUT BIG
IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS**

10 Tips for Facilitating Conversation About Big Ideas and Innovations

Written by Jeffrey Cufaude

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It's been two weeks of innovation as I was one of the facilitators for last week's National Summit on Association Innovation sponsored by the Wisconsin Society of Association Executives and as a volunteer, helped champion this week's ASAE InnovationTalks campaign. Contributing to both events reminded me of some common sense tips about what is required to facilitate conversations about big ideas and innovations. The list below is not meant to be all-inclusive, but to highlight some of the core considerations.

Determine the right time and environment. Participants need the right mental and physical space to think differently and more expansively. Block sufficient time and create an environment conducive to sharing ideas, sketching possibilities, and freeflowing discussion. Intimate and flexible space; flipcharts, whiteboards, and walls covered with IdeaPaint; food, music, and props to sustain the energy. Modeling clay and other prototyping supplies. Each of these is a desirable environmental factor.

Articulate the purpose and define success. Skeptics and fans alike need to understand just what the conversation is intended to produce in order to contribute appropriately. It's hard to do the what if you don't understand the why.

Put the conversation in context. Don't make innovation something that occurs outside of your organization's efforts. Connect conversations about ideas and innovations to your ongoing development of programs and services and incorporate these discussions into your regular planning routines.

Clarify the terms and process to be used. People need to understand the rules of engagement, whatever they are determined to be, as well as terms likely to be thrown about including creativity, innovation, value, et al.

Create, critique, construct. Remember these three types of thinking, usually attributed to Edward deBono, and make sure your process addresses them in this order: (1) What's possible? (2) Which idea(s) do we choose to advance? (3) How will we efficiently implement the ideas chosen?

Facilitate assertively. What I routinely witness when facilitating ideation and innovation conversations is that participants too quickly abandon the stated process and move straight to problem-solving and implementation. Don't let that happen. Ensure people dwell longer in possibilities and more expansive thinking.

Start with observed behaviors. At the WSAE Summit, Thomas Stat, formerly with IDEO's Chicago office, reminded us that innovation begins with behavior, not ideas. If you carefully observe member or customer behavior without judgment, the rich story their actions tell will instruct you as to where innovation may be needed.

Use disruptive premises to evoke creative possibilities. Once you've identified the opportunity areas to pursue, use disruptive hypotheses or unreasonable provocations as suggested by Luke Williams in his book *Disrupt*. Doing so will help shift the subsequent creative thinking away from the traditional solutions and into potentially more inventive and interesting areas.

Listen for concepts behind ideas. No matter how assertively you facilitate the process, our inner critics emerge too quickly in the discussions. When you hear people reacting negatively about a specific idea (example: there should be set office hours), identify its underlying concept (example: flexible work schedules) and ask what other ideas people might have that relate to it. This keeps the creative energy moving forward and is a technique called Concept Fan by Edward DeBono.

Identify opportunities to experiment. Seeking small wins (James Kouzes and Barry Posner). Try stuff to learn what works (Jim Collins). Making little bets (Peter Sims). Small innovations, not just blockbusters (Rosabeth Moss Kanter). Name your innovation guru and each has his or her own way of trying to quickly get us in action and in the process of discovery. Instead of trying to 100% plan our way to success, we need to move quickly from planning to playing with some of the possibilities we have identified.

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About the Author

Jeffrey Cufaude is an architect of ideas, custom-designing and presenting engaging learning experiences including keynotes, workshops, retreats, complete leadership conferences, and strategy think tanks, as well as teaching presentation design and facilitation skills. Follow him on Twitter @jcufaude. His web page is <http://www.ideaarchitects.org>.

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