



# THE ART OF POLLINATING IDEAS

*Rewarding creativity immediately is one of the key techniques taught by **Disney Institute**.*

**W**ITH THE BRUSHSTROKES THAT FIRST shaped Mickey Mouse to the dream that launched global theme parks, Walt Disney secured a place among the great American innovators. But how do you replicate that inventiveness? How do you keep the innovation flowing?

For Walt Disney, the key often lay with maintaining some humility. When the founder was in his later years, a young boy visited the Disney studio and was not overawed by the great man's presence. "What do you do around here?" he asked innocently. Replied Walt: "I think of myself as a little bee, going around here and pollinating ideas."

Few organizations have tended the garden of invention and innovation as remarkably well as The Walt Disney Company. And Disney Institute, the professional development arm of the company, has been helping other organizations adapt Disney best practices as well, transforming themselves into better competitors. Innovation is a priority with companies in nearly all industries these days, says Bruce Jones, programming director of the 25-year-old organization.

Typically, Disney Institute sends experienced facilitators to a client's office or retreat to conduct training sessions with senior and middle managers, those who supervise front-line employees.

What often troubles clients is low employee morale, and that is often the result of

a company culture that does not recognize and reward worker creativity, Jones says.

The Disney system of generating enthusiasm and ideas is based on a series of core principles. Among the most important is rewarding creativity immediately.

"Disney encourages managers to spend 60% to 70% of their time in the field," says Jones, "and to look for employees who are doing things right." The employee who fits that description gets a card on the spot recognizing his or her contribution. In time that contribution might lead to a bonus or other material gift, but employees emphasize that recognition is by itself very important.

Also crucial to Disney is whether the idea is repeatable, whether it can be pollinated. "An idea inside your head is great," observes Jones, "but once it's in a bunch of heads, it's really valuable."

The chief of wardrobe at Hong Kong Disneyland, for example, came up with a new way of distributing costumes to cast members who entertain and assist visitors at the theme park. Traditionally, cast members had to line up and wait for an attendant to fetch outfits one by one, try them on, and check them out—a time-consuming, expensive procedure. So the Hong Kong wardrobe chief let cast members wander the racks themselves, pick the appropriate RFID chip-embedded costumes, and check them out by scanner. So efficient was the Hong Kong innovation that Walt Disney World in Orlando adopted it as well.

Not all ideas are great. But managers are encouraged not to ridicule a wacky idea, instead simply noting it might not be practical for now. After all, at one time it seemed absurd to think that a mouse could become an American icon. ♡





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