

Hiring People You Don't Like

By Robert I. Sutton

Hire people who make you squirm. Find happy employees and encourage them to fight. And reward failure. Sound like weird management ideas? In some circles, they are. But when it comes to nonprofit innovation, these ideas can be essential.

To innovate, nonprofits must do things that clash with accepted management practices, with common but misguided beliefs about the right way to manage any kind of work. In organization after organization, managers act as if they can keep developing new programs, services and solutions by adhering to old ways of managing people and making decisions. This happens even in organizations where managers say that innovative work requires different practices than routine work. Yet these same managers continue to use methods that force people to see old things in old ways, expecting new and valuable ideas to somehow magically appear.

Make no mistake--most of what organizations do, and should do, is not creative or weird. When nonprofit directors want to do things in proven ways, they are wise to drive out variation-- especially when the proven ways still work. Nonprofits that use tried-and-true methods do things faster, cheaper and more consistently than those that rely on new and unproven knowledge. Doing routine work with proven methods is the right thing to do most of the time. There is ample evidence, after all, that most new ideas are bad, and most old ideas are good. But when innovation is the goal, organizations need variation in what people do, think about and produce.

In my book *Weird Ideas That Work*, (New York: The Free Press, 2002), I present 11-and-a-half weird ideas that promote innovation in the for-profit world. I advocate everything from hiring "slow learners" to hiring people you don't need -- ideas that seem counterintuitive to most managers. But research shows that my ideas spark innovation by helping companies do at least one of three things: (1) increase variance in available knowledge, (2) see old things in new ways, and (3) break from the past. These are the three basic organizing principles for innovative work.

The question remained, are these weird ideas being used in the nonprofit sector as well? To find out, we put the question to executive directors who recently completed Stanford's Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders.

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Several of these leaders pointed out that my ideas for innovation assume management can afford to take big risks -- something nonprofits generally can't afford, especially in a time of shrinking resources. "The premise of the weird ideas is based on a model that does not translate easily into the nonprofit sector," said Jennifer Duston, executive director of the Oakland East Bay Symphony. "It's based on a for-profit model ... where they expect not only to take risks, but to take losses. We cannot suffer those losses. We have no tolerance for risk. We are cutting expenses- not to the bone, into the bone. ... We can't afford to reward failure."

The daily pressures on overburdened directors make weird approaches unappealing. "A nonprofit arts director in this day and age is fighting so many battles, the temptation is to put your energy where the fires are," said Georgina Lagoria, director of the Contemporary Museum of Honolulu. "Imagine how easy it would be to have someone come in and not challenge the status quo."

Yet we found that some weird ideas that resonated with nonprofit leaders. Among those that may surprise you: Hire people who make you uncomfortable, even those you dislike.

One of the most persistent findings in the behavioral sciences is that people prefer to spend time with similar people. Study after study confirms that "birds of a feather flock together," while there is little evidence that "opposites attract."

Our emotional responses to a job candidate are like a divining rod. When we have negative emotional reactions to people, it may not have anything to do with whether they can do the job. Rather, it can be because they have different beliefs, ideas and knowledge. I am not suggesting you actively seek out rude, insulting or incompetent people for your nonprofit. If, however, a candidate seems competent and has skills your organization needs -- but has different beliefs, knowledge and skills than most insiders -- negative emotional reactions or evaluations are reasons in favor of hiring the person. It will help bring in new ideas.

When I present this weird idea to executives, managers and engineers, it provokes three reactions. They look at me as if I am out of my mind. They tell me that if their company hired people who didn't like one another, it would undermine teamwork and make it a horrible place to work. A few people, however, respond with stories about how their organization has benefited

from people who make everyone uncomfortable, even who are widely disliked, because they think differently, act differently, have different backgrounds, or advocate unpopular ideas.

Consider what Marilyn Sullivan did. Sullivan is the executive director of Bethlehem Haven, an emergency shelter and support organization for homeless women in Pittsburgh. Several years ago, Sullivan brought in an engineer as a volunteer, despite real concerns that she would clash with her organization's culture. "I was uncomfortable, and I had my doubts as to whether she would work out," Sullivan said. "She seemed rigid. I thought that an engineer would think more in the box instead of outside. Everything is measured and ruled [for an engineer]. And this place is organized chaos."

Yet the very qualities that Sullivan worried about turned out to be a boon. The engineer was quickly promoted to a part-time, paid position. She took the languishing volunteer program and turned it around, put a work schedule in place, developed a volunteer manual, and created structure where there was none. She revamped and improved a quarterly newsletter. She used her computer skills to create formal invitations for an afternoon tea party with the executive director. "She does all the little things that I don't do," Sullivan said.

But she also did some big things. Sullivan had trouble convincing the homeless shelter residents to volunteer at the Pittsburgh Community Storehouse in exchange for much needed supplies. One reason was the lack of reliable transportation, so the engineer convinced the property manager and maintenance man to drive the women to the storehouse, setting up a regular schedule. With transportation in place, the women began to volunteer, and the shelter received everything from nylons, bras and sweaters to office and medical supplies. "She salvaged our reputation," Sullivan said. "She organized it and made it happen."

I've found other managers who actually seek out job candidates and colleagues who make them uncomfortable because it sparks needed innovations. Peter Skillman, director of product design engineering at the for-profit Handspring, says, "Hire people who make you squirm; that's how you get new ideas." Quite a few managers have told me that, when they are trying to bring in some new ideas, they hire people that they expect other insiders will dislike, or at least will feel uncomfortable around.

That is just what Louise Lanzilotti did at the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, which has been producing children's shows on the island for 48 years. Last spring, after a technical director was fired, the theater was thrust into chaos. They were about to open a show called "Runny Noses, Tiny Tales," but they were way behind, and the entire staff was pitching in to get the risers built in time. That week, an ex-Marine was on site interviewing for the tech rigger job. The muscular ex-Marine with the crew cut pitched in to build the risers, at one point working 20 hours a day.

Lanzilotti was trying to decide whether to hire the ex-Marine for the rigger job, so she took an informal poll of her 25-person staff. "There were many negative comments about him," she said. "People thought he was pushy, that he was not going to be so good around women, that he was too brassy." They also thought the Southern "macho" ex-Marine with the "tough dude" attitude would not fit in with the theater's reserved and accommodating Hawaiian culture. "People said, 'Oh my God! Don't hire that guy!'" Lanzilotti recalled. "Everyone thought we shouldn't hire him."

But she had a different idea. Not only was Lanzilotti impressed with the ex-Marine's work ethic, she believed the very traits that made people uncomfortable-- his straightforward talk and manner -- would work to the theater's advantage. "People here tend to not always talk about things up front," she said. "It's subtle, but I think jiggling that a bit is a good idea, because you don't solve a lot of things when you don't know what the problems are. People who are more upfront...help with getting everything out in the open."

The ex-Marine quickly got the set building back on track, taking a huge burden off of the artistic director. He also went above and beyond, establishing mutually beneficial ties with local businesses the old-fashioned way. He sat down with folks, bantered about their families, and gave them free theater tickets and cases of beer. After befriending workers at one nearby company, he convinced them to give the theater three flats worth of 4-foot by 8-foot foam core, used for props, sets and show posters. He convinced other companies to donate lumber and discount tools.

"He has a good way of associating with people," Lanzilotti said, adding that in some important (though not obvious) ways, the American South turns out to be "just like Hawaii."

Robert I. Sutton teaches science, engineering and organizational behaviors at Stanford. This article is excerpted from Stanford Social Innovation Review, a new quarterly published by the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford Graduate School of Business. Copyright © 2003 Board of trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University. To read more of Sutton's "weird ideas" for sparking nonprofit innovation, see the premiere issue of Stanford Social Innovation Review, coming this spring. Charter subscriptions are available at www.ssireview.com. Or contact Stanford Social Innovation Review, Stanford Graduate School of Business, 518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305. Tel.(650) 725-5399; Fax(650) 724-3629.

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