

How to gain a black belt in idea workout

Master musicians accomplish a remarkable feat: They constantly keep in mind the gestalt of the entire piece they are performing while simultaneously focusing on playing each note with unsurpassed virtuosity.

Likewise, leaders need to pursue a grand vision while not overlooking game-deciding frontline issues. In turn, they must never lose sight of the whole when being absorbed with all-important details.

The process of what I call “multi-stage idea workout” helps the guiding spirit to master the above described bifocal challenge. In the first stage, he must meticulously screen proposals in a fact-based and imaginative way together with his team.

In subsequent stages, collective intelligence again may be exploited to reshape suggestions or generate new options altogether, if this is expedient. The original set of proposals may emerge from the innovation honeymoon, the unusually insightful and creative commencement period of new organizational members, and from other sources.

To excel in the first stage of idea workout, executives must master the intricate details of how to use strategic winnowing tools, designed for separating idea grain from chaff, in a process of precisely and comprehensively screening diverse ideas.

1. Precise scoring and placement of ideas

The “innovation honeymoon board” ranks short-listed proposals in rows and shows their scores in the form of moon points on various assessment criteria, which are arranged in columns. The results from the scoring exercise are en-

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tered into the “strategic winnowing sieve”. This is a matrix containing generic headings, such as “value for organization” and “ease of implementation”, which summarize all the granular assessment criteria in the innovation honeymoon board (see illustration). At first sight, placing options, scored on the board, in the sieve seems easy, but the devil is in the practical details.

Assuming you only used full moons and empty circles as scores, the proposals fall into different quadrants, and there is no overlap, it is sufficient simply to label the entire quadrant that you identified as correct location with the name of the idea. If, to complicate the above case, several proposals must be placed in the same quadrant, you can use the shortcut of drawing tiny black circles, which symbolize the respective suggestions, in the middle of the said quadrant.

Yet oftentimes, you need to carry out more granular appraisals and use a greater variety of moon phases to draw finer distinctions between the various proposals. In such cases,

you must determine the exact corresponding grid location for each suggestion. To get down to the nitty-gritty of using the strategic winnowing sieve, let us imagine a proposal scored a half-moon on one generic dimension and an empty circle on the other summary category. In this case, the item needs to be placed in the middle of the line belonging to the former category at the intersection between two quadrants, and the zero mark for the latter one.

A suggestion that obtained a full moon as summary score for one generic dimension must be placed on the extreme point of this category. How close a suggestion with a score between zero and the highest mark will be located to the boundary depends on its particular aggregate moon phase.

For example, a proposal with a three-quarter-moon for both generic dimensions must be placed in the center of the upper right-hand quadrant in a two-by-two matrix. If it scores a quarter-moon on the vertical axis and a three-quarter moon on the horizontal axis, it needs to be positioned in the middle of the lower right-hand quadrant (see “Idea B” in the illustration).

A borderline depiction results from using half-moons for scoring in conjunction with a two-by-two matrix. To avoid indeterminate positions, you can resort to a three-by-three grid, including low, medium and high marks. A proposal that obtained half-moons on both generic dimensions would then be placed in the center of the quadrant corresponding to medium marks on both summary categories. A suggestion that obtained a quarter-moon on

one generic dimension and a zero mark on another then would be placed at the 25th percentile position on the axis that corresponds to the former summary category.

As you can see, when you use a three-by-three matrix, the placement task, which often involves thinking in terms of quartiles, becomes more difficult. Besides, the subsequent interpretation will be more challenging. Making sense of proposals located in a cubicle is even more demanding!

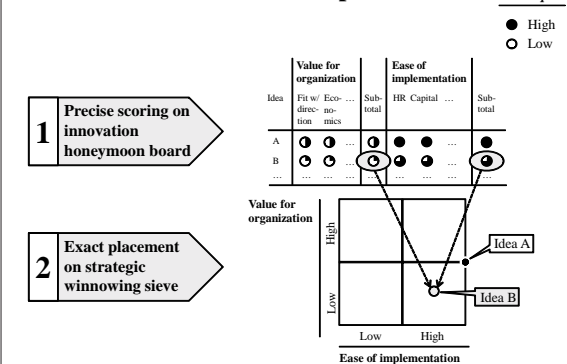
My experience shows that it is best to subsume all sub-criteria under two generic categories. When it is really necessary to include more than two summary dimensions, it is easier to profile proposals in horizontal bar charts than using shapes such as cubicles or cones on raised-relief maps.

2. Full-dimensional idea inspection

To fully grasp all proposed ideas, executives must use both, the board and sieve, in a flexible manner. The board literally helps them understand the breadth, length, depth and height of a diverse set of proposals; the sieve displays the aggregate results only, in a format that is particularly suitable for high-level comparisons. Used in unison, the tools give the strategist a quick overview of the total and individual scores associated with all options. These instruments enable him easily to switch between the big picture and granular perspective in several iterations of individual case assessments and inter-case comparisons.

Scanning the board in horizontal direction, the torch-bearer will quickly recognize the comparative

Granular idea assessment in practice



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strengths and weaknesses of each individual idea. Examining the board in vertical direction, he can make in-depth comparisons between all options. Vertical inspection immediately reveals the opportunity costs associated with each idea, that is, the next best alternative they have to forego when they can choose one option only.

As one way of vertical scrutiny, the individual scores on specific sub-criteria can be compared across all options. This can be helpful, for example, if some sub-criteria are deemed particularly important.

In his controversial novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote: “One should absorb the color of life, but one should never remember its details. Details are always vulgar.” Yet, clearly, categorical and

obdurate contempt for granularity spells disaster for leaders. To succeed, a man of premier rank must gain a black belt in the tough new discipline of idea workout. In a nutshell, the torch-bearer must become capable of seeing not only forests, but also the tiny leaves and fruits of individual trees, even amid the fog of war!

(Part 8 of the Innovation Honeymoon series. To be continued.)

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