Good Ideas Are Not Enough

Idea In Short

Good ideas in business rarely succeed without structured execution. Turning innovation into reality requires developing concepts thoughtfully, planning resource and risk management, learning from outcomes through continuous improvement, and persisting amid resistance. The most successful organizations combine creativity with discipline, ensuring ideas are supported by planning, learning frameworks like DMAIC, and strong leadership commitment. True innovation thrives not on inspiration alone, but through sustained effort, adaptability, and persistence in implementation.

We've all heard the phrase, "He had the talent, but not the application." It's used to describe individuals who have immense potential but never fully realize it. While this may sound familiar in the context of personal aspirations, it applies just as much to business. It's not enough to have a good idea. In fact, ideas alone rarely get off the ground without proper execution. In business, many promising ideas don't reach their potential, leaving companies wondering where they went wrong.

Good Ideas in Business

Innovation is often at the forefront of strategic discussions. Governments, think tanks, and businesses all stress the importance of innovation and becoming more productive. Brainstorming sessions, think tanks, and the push for "thinking outside the box" are common in workplaces. However, only a small percentage of top companies are driven by a truly unique and groundbreaking idea. In fact, many companies rely on resources, selling others' goods, or repackaging products, rather than originating an entirely new concept. So where do these ideas go?

In my experience, good ideas often get lost in the organizational landscape. It's as if they are scattered like seeds on barren ground, without enough care or attention to cultivate them. For an idea to survive and thrive, we need more than just the concept itself. We need

to think clearly, plan thoroughly, learn from mistakes, and persist against competition and obstacles.

Think: Developing the Idea

The first step in turning an idea into a reality is thinking—properly developing the idea and understanding its potential. According to the Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development [OECD], there are four main types of innovation:

1. Product innovation
2. Process innovation
3. Marketing innovation
4. Organisational innovation

Each type can exist on different levels. For example, solving existing problems might lead to innovations like a rotary compression engine, while solving unmet or unstated needs could result in breakthroughs like text messaging. At the highest level, innovation can even create entirely new fields, such as nanotechnology.

To maximize innovation, it's crucial to bring together a diverse group of people. A team with varied perspectives is more likely to produce creative and viable solutions. Diversity doesn't just refer to race or gender—it includes differences in thinking styles, knowledge, skills, and even personal motivations. Effective innovation teams need not only people who generate ideas but also individuals who can sponsor, refine, and implement those ideas within the organization.

Plan: Turning the Idea Into Action

The excitement of a new idea can sometimes cloud the need for planning. Even when an idea receives funding, it often stalls because the planning is insufficient or incomplete. Key aspects that require attention include:

- **Resource Planning**: Ensuring you have the right people, tools, and equipment to execute the idea
- **Budget Planning**: Estimating costs and securing funds
- **Milestone Planning**: Setting clear, achievable goals along the way

- **Integration Planning**: Making sure the new idea aligns with day-to-day business operations
- **Stakeholder Management**: Identifying who needs to be involved and how to keep them on board
- **Risk Management**: Planning for potential issues and ways to mitigate them
- **Change Management**: Preparing for challenges in adopting the new idea

Without thorough planning, even the best ideas can encounter obstacles that were never anticipated. Incomplete planning can lead to unforeseen consequences, causing unnecessary complications for the organization.

Learn: Refining the Idea

Once an idea is in motion, it's important to recognize that there will be unintended consequences—both positive and negative. This is where learning from mistakes comes into play. Having contingency plans in place is crucial to managing these unforeseen outcomes. But learning doesn't stop there.

A structured continuous improvement process, such as DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control), helps refine ideas after they're implemented. This method ensures that:

- The new idea is clearly defined and mapped out
- Outcomes are measured using relevant performance indicators
- Data is analyzed to understand the impact and unintended consequences
- Adjustments are made to improve the idea's effectiveness
- The results are monitored to maintain control and ensure long-term success

The goal is not to avoid mistakes but to learn from them and continuously improve the idea.

Persist: Overcoming Resistance

Every good idea will face resistance. Whether it's political, budgetary, or simply due to the "not invented here" mentality, obstacles are inevitable. However, persistence is key. Ideas can die quietly or with a bang if they aren't championed properly.

Sponsors of new ideas must remain committed, even when the path becomes difficult. They

need to regularly communicate early successes and demonstrate the potential long-term benefits of the idea to secure ongoing support. As new challenges arise, persistent sponsors work to resolve issues and maintain momentum.

Notable examples of persistence include the development of Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme, as well as large infrastructure projects like Sydney's second airport and the National Broadband Network. These initiatives succeeded because of dedicated individuals who persisted through resistance and setbacks.

Good ideas alone don't have value. It's the combination of careful planning, continuous learning, and relentless persistence that turns a good idea into a successful innovation. Organizations must create the right environment to nurture ideas, refine them, and persist in the face of challenges. When all these elements come together, good ideas can thrive, driving progress and success.

Summary

Ideas alone are insufficient for success; execution determines impact. Businesses must think critically, plan thoroughly, learn continuously, and persist through resistance. Effective innovation needs structured planning, risk management, feedback loops, and champions who drive progress despite obstacles. Examples like Australia's NDIS and major infrastructure projects show that lasting change arises from persistent leaders and disciplined learning. Organizations that balance creativity with structure turn promising ideas into transformative results.