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OF THE INNOVATION EXPEDITION,  
BY GIJS VAN WULFEN.  
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## *How to Pick the Right Idea?*

**Think different.** That's the essence of the creative processes in coming up with ideas for innovative products, services or business models. An awful lot of brainstorming sessions or ideation workshops take place to generate fresh, new ideas. After generating ideas you end up with a wall of ideas. This is a great thing! I like to quote the American chemist and Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling, who said "the best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas."



Generating 'outside the box' ideas is often not the problem in an ideation workshop with 10 or more people. The real critical moment is when you go from the divergence phase into the convergence phase. Imagine you have a wall of 500+ ideas in front of you. Now what do you do? How do you pick the right idea? That's the question.

I've spent the last 10 years experimenting a lot on how to deal with this essential question. It's not an easy one to answer. Unfortunately, I have not found the 'holy grail'. However, the great advantage of continuous experimentation in converging, selecting and improving ideas is that you do end up learning a lot. And I'd like to share five of my key learning tips on how to pick the right idea.

**1. Take your time.** One of the most frequent mistakes is spending a lot of time generating ideas, leaving hardly any time in the ideation workshop to converge, select and improve them. You should spend at least 2/3 of your process on picking the right idea and 1/3 on getting a lot of ideas, instead of the other way around. Promising ideas at the front end of innovation are like rough diamonds, which look like other ordinary stones, but have the potential to shine beautifully in the end. You have to take your

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time to be able to recognize them. And be sure to converge in several steps. Even in several workshops. Don't expect to recognize rough diamonds among 500 other stones in one or two hours.

## 2. Have a clear vision of what you want.

How can you select ideas if you don't know what you are looking for? Especially when the converging, selecting and improving is done as a group it is important that you have a shared vision on where you want to go. That's why it is essential to start an innovation project with a clear and concrete innovation assignment and involve your senior managers. This forces your company's senior management, from the start, to be concrete about the market/target group for which the innovations must be developed and which criteria these new concepts must meet. Use these concrete criteria to help you identify and select the right ideas in your ideation workshops.

**3. Reflect from the customer's perspective.** In converging, selecting and improving ideas it is very important to criticize and challenge them from different perspectives. From my own innovation practice, I've learned that there are huge differences in how people within a company perceive new ideas and how

their potential customers perceive those same ideas. And that's why I advise you to incorporate idea reflection workshops with potential target groups in your ideation process. And based on their feedback proceed to pick the right ideas and improve on them

## 4. Make a mini new business case.

Although mood boards and concept descriptions are a good beginning, they are often too vague for managers, who think in terms of potential turnover and profit, to make their decisions on those ideas. Managers prefer business cases: a clear, strategic, commercial, professional and financial plan for a new initiative or a new investment. So, be sure at the end, you have picked ideas that are attractive and can easily be made into mini new business cases. At this stage it is just a 'preview' of the possible business case later; it isn't as detailed yet and it has more uncertainties than its 'big brother' later on in your stage-gate innovation process. This way you make your ideas more persuasive by highlighting the strategic, commercial, and professional aspects of the innovative product or service.

**5. Make a feasibility road map.** Markets are changing faster than ever, shortening the product life cycles in almost every

sector. In periods of economic downturn organizations on the one hand need innovative concepts more than ever and on the other hand actually cut resources for innovation, while often denying that they do. So companies need to juggle how to generate attractive, innovative ideas which at the same time are realistic and feasible in the short term. It's your challenge to pick great ideas, which combine attractiveness with feasibility. If you don't, your innovation won't make it to the market. A number of studies on new product innovation (Robert G. Cooper, 2011) showed that for every 7 new product ideas, about 4 enter development, 1.5 are launched and only 1 succeeds. These are poor odds. Improve them, and make a feasibility road map, which will support the feasibility of your innovative product or service idea.

I hope these five learning tips on how to pick the right idea will inspire you to become an even more successful innovator!