

# Harvesting and sharing a few great ideas



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Although it took place roughly 20 years ago, the lesson is seared into my mind like the brand on a cow's rear flank.

My peer team of managers was attending teamwork training, the outdoor experiential kind. As our challenge was being described to us by the event's facilitators, I felt like a kid on Christmas morning. We were to split into sub-teams with each sub-team handed a compass and a map on which various points were designated.

We were to use our orienteering skills to find the points hidden among the camp's 1,100 acres of rugged wilderness along the Des Moines River. Each point earned us supplies that we would use to build a raft to float our team. Based on the number of team members floated and tasks completed on the raft we would earn "revenue" for our fictitious "company."

This was right up my alley. I love hiking. Maps, compasses and knot tying were specialties of mine as an Eagle Scout. I couldn't believe I was getting paid to have so much fun.

Our sub-team consisted of three engineering managers and our administrative assistant Deb. I gave the group a quick lesson in orienteering.

We divided up targeted points among the sub-teams and took off. Our initial point was located in an open field relatively close to our "headquarters" cabin. We determined the bearing and distance from the map, used the compass to select a landmark in the correct direction and counted our paces. Voila! There was the 4-inch red square with a white letter attached to the trunk of tree, hidden below the tall grass.

A quick celebration ensued and we selected our next target. We've got this.

We set our attention on our second point, again getting our bearing and distance from the map (roughly a half mile). This time, however, our journey took us into the woods so we had to opt for an intermediate target on the edge of the forest, perhaps 100 yards away. Once there, we reasoned, we would pick another landmark and proceed to our mark in multiple segments.

As we advanced into the woods, however, the growth became thicker and thicker. Our segments grew shorter and shorter due to limited visibility. Once a landmark was

established, we could no longer walk directly to it due to thickets. Exactly which tree was our target again? We kept our heads down and struggled forward, burning an hour of valuable time.

We even tried creating a landmark, tying a bandana on the end of a long stick and swinging it as the compass person (me) lined it up in what we now hoped was the correct direction. Our segments were down to 15 yards.

Relatively quiet to this point Deb spoke up, "Guys this is crazy. There has to be a better way. We arbitrarily chose the last point as our starting point because we knew where we were. Can't we find a distinct landmark on this map that's much closer to our target and start from there?"

Silence. Three engineering managers sheepishly stared at their feet as lightbulbs flashed above their heads. We had literally lost the forest in the trees. Our initial success further cemented our paradigm. Finally someone muttered, "I think that's a good idea."

We looked at our topographical map and noted a ridge coming to a point not 30 yards from the target. If we could find that rather distinct feature it would be much easier to shoot a new line from there to our target as opposed to trying to follow our current course through the Amazon jungle for another quarter mile.

Fifteen minutes later we were celebrating the capture of our second point. More importantly, we had developed an improved process for locating future points. We radioed the other sub-teams to share our learning.

We might still be wandering through the thicket if we hadn't previously established a culture on our team where Deb felt safe sharing a critical observation and an idea. Just as importantly, an environment that recognized that managers don't have the monopoly on good ideas and that each idea deserves a respectful hearing, evaluation and response was created.

If your organization seems to lack creativity and innovation, a good place to start is to determine if you are unintentionally limiting the number of idea generators. You never know where your next great idea is coming from — but if you place limits on people you know where it won't come from.

Happy Administrative Professional Day on April 26.

## RICK SAYS

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