

A quick one-page story about the title of the book *Mustard Doesn't Go on Corn!*

You may be asking at this point, 'so what's up with the title of this book, Mustard Doesn't Go on Corn! and what could mustard and corn possibly have to do with innovation?' On the surface, it may seem the answer is 'nothing.' However, as you will see, they have *everything* to do with innovation.

I once brought my young daughter to a small children's museum. Everywhere I looked I saw words like explore, discover, and imagine. In one section of the museum there was a small play kitchen that could accommodate about 10 kids. I was watching my daughter have a grand old time putting plastic grapes in the play oven when I saw a remarkable event. There was a little boy about 3 or 4 years old who had a plate with some plastic corn on it. He said to his mom, "OK, mom, I'm going to put mustard on your corn." Just as he was about to do so his mom said, in a semi-nurturing voice, "mustard doesn't go on corn." The kid's face dropped. What made it worse is what happened next. Another little kid very emphatically said, "No, mustard doesn't go on corn." Side note – it was an empty mustard dispenser and plastic corn.

You may be asking 'what's the big deal here?' But it was a big deal – to that child. And, it was at that moment in time I realized why innovation is often so difficult for companies and our society. Here was a little kid seeing words and images encouraging him to explore and be creative, and the second he does, boom – 'mustard doesn't go on corn!' In a matter of seconds the kid had his idea shot down by an authority figure and was piled on by a peer.

Sound familiar?

Being the instigator I am, I could not just sit back and watch this happen. I said, "I like mustard on corn." The kid looked confused. "I do. I put mustard on everything I eat." Still looking confused and a little hesitant he asked, "You do?" "Yup, even on spaghetti." Suddenly a slow rolling energy started to take over that little kitchen and within seconds other kids were getting involved. Now, mustard on corn didn't seem so foolish. "How about Cheerios?" someone asked. "Every day," I responded. And on and on it went, eventually with the other child who had originally dismissed such a 'foolish' idea joining in on the fun.

Let's play out this same scenario at work. A company has an 'innovation initiative' and puts up signs and banners with phrases like 'every idea counts' or 'innovation is king.' A person (the child who suggested putting mustard on corn) suggests an idea. The boss (the mother in the story above) publicly says 'that won't work.' A co-worker (the other child) then says, 'yeah that's not a good idea.' Now, imagine that a person like me was not there for support. The idea dies. Just like a seed thrown on a cement sidewalk, there is no chance of it growing. And the answer to this issue is not contained in a PowerPoint slide from an expensive executive weekend seminar at Harvard. It exists in the simple premise – and one that is supported by science and research – that it is simple behaviors, coupled with a clear process to bring ideas to action, that enables companies to become truly innovative, not pouring countless amounts of resources into glamorous posters, sophisticated presentations, and high priced advice – all of which are not needed.

In this workplace example, just as with the child at the museum, it is obvious - be open to ideas and respect the input of others. If your organization's culture does not promote an atmosphere of sincere respect and openness, how can you truly expect people to come forth with ideas? How can you have a workforce that is engaged and contributing more than simply doing their work? How can we focus on implementation of ideas when we don't even have ideas to implement? The answer to all of those questions is you can't.