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## IBD'S 10 SECRETS TO SUCCESS

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Investor's Business Daily has spent years analyzing leaders and successful people in all walks of life. Most have 10 traits that, when combined, can turn dreams into reality. Each day, we highlight one.

**8 DON'T BE AFRAID TO INNOVATE; BE DIFFERENT:** Following the herd is a sure way to mediocrity.

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## Mining For Golden Ideas

**8** Brainstorming's one of the most powerful ways your company can bring breakthroughs to the surface.

Trouble is, most companies don't mine ideas effectively, says Charles Holland, chief executive of QualPro, a company that's helped more than a thousand clients learn how to develop and test innovative notions using Multivariable Testing, or MVT.

One bad habit that can lead to corporate brain lock? Only allowing top brass to make suggestions.

"Our research says there's absolutely no correlation between good ideas and where they come from," Holland said. "You're just as likely to get a good idea from the person at the bottom level of the organization as you are from the CEO... I've had experiences with CEO after CEO where the suggestions didn't work and I've got experiences where a part-time assistant down in marketing, a person at that level, made the suggestion that was the big hitter and turned things around."

If your firm's in head-scratching mode, Holland notes in "Breakthrough Business Results with MVT," don't forget to pick these brains:

■ **Front-line workers.** "If they say that the process they work on every day functions better when the weather is bad, they are probably right," Holland said.

■ **Management.** By adding their input, they help ideas become accepted. "Just as important, they are likely to have some good ideas."

■ **Technical personnel.** "Because of their technical skills and knowledge, (they might) be able to contribute significantly to the brainstorming process," he said.

■ **Customers.** Both customers or

those who rub elbows with customers will give you an honest opinion.

■ **Suppliers and those who work with them.** "They... (might) have ideas about how they can adjust their own processes or products."

■ **Naive observers.** "He or she may make very creative suggestions for improving the process simply because he or she is not too close to the problem."

Though some business gurus encourage you to move from the gut when choosing which course of action you'll take, Holland says, intuition alone usually doesn't yield the best results. Even the greatest-sounding ideas are only good about 25% of the time, Holland adds.

The only way to tell whether a notion's a stinker or a star? Test it out. The knee-jerk tendency is to challenge one idea at a time. That's a waste, Holland said. "That's for another world, where they only have one dimension."

Instead, companies ought to try out many ideas at a time, as well as different combinations of ideas, to find out what works best. "The more you have, the more you're going to have that help. It's a total numbers game," he said.

During brainstorming sessions, Holland's clients easily come up with hundreds, if not thousands, of ideas for different business areas.

One way to pick through light bulbs, he advises, is to test only those ideas that are practical, fast and cost-free.

"Your people have the answers; let them put their proposed solutions forward," said Ed Mueller, chief executive of Williams-Sonoma, which has used Holland's theories to improve its catalogs. "Resist your bias to squelch those solutions you don't like." **Amy Alexander**