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Ideas at Work

How the best agencies
leverage innovation
against tough odds

Michael Kelly, Chicago Park District
General Superintendent/CEO (left),
and Adam Schwerner, Director
of Natural Resources/Liaison to
The Museums in the Park

November's Elections | Darell Hammond Interview | City Camping Liability

COVER STORY

SECRETS of Innovative Agencies

How good ideas make it to the light of day
in difficult times

ANNE RYAN



ONE LATE-APRIL MORNING IN 2010,

Chicago commuters driving to work along Lake Shore Drive saw a changed and startling landscape. Where that stretch of boulevard along Lake Michigan had been a normal leafy green just the day before, it was now dotted with 30-foot trees painted brilliant shades of orange and blue.

"I personally can't tell whether I love this or hate this, but I can't stop looking at it whenever I pass by," the *Chicago Tribune's* James Janega wrote.

Others were anything but ambivalent about the vividly painted trees—an initiative undertaken by the Chicago Park District to draw public attention to the city's urban forest. A number of fast-growing mulberry and other non-native trees, slated for removal by the park agency's natural resources division, were turned briefly into a colorful public art exhibit. It was a display that some residents and tourists described as garish and jarring—an unwelcome interference with the natural landscape. Many others, however, praised

the whimsy and creativity of the park district's melding of urban forestry awareness with public art.

"Is this art, fun, or just plain wrong?" one local blogger asked.

The man who dreamed up the painted-tree project is Adam Schwerner, Director of Natural Resources for the Chicago Park District. And that forest of orange and blue was not his first experiment in highlighting the natural landscape through coats of paint. It was, however, the first time Schwerner had directed his staff to paint trees that were still alive. He had, for example, once painted 100 dead, nursery-culled maple trees yellow and orange—and then "planted" them along Lake Shore Drive with a post hole digger. "People liked them. The site was changed," he says. "People driving downtown through the northern portions of Chicago had... a different kind of experience."

But it was, he says, the painting of living trees that "got people agitated and excited and entranced and enthralled and angry."

This section was prepared and edited by Richard J. Dolesh, NRPA Vice President Parks and Conservation, and *Parks & Recreation* Managing Editor Elizabeth Beard, Senior Editor Maureen Hannan, and Editor Phil Hayward. Case studies were submitted by the agencies profiled in this article.

Innovation, as the saying goes, is anything but business as usual. And whether it happens within a multi-national corporation or a municipal government, organizational innovation is just as likely to disturb and anger people as it is to engage and inspire. Chicago is just one example of a park agency that is trying out imaginative ideas with the goal of adding splashes of color to public land and freshening the public's perception of parks. Just as Schwerner altered a familiar vista along his city's main road, many other park innovators may try a fresh approach to master planning or arts programming or even to the creative process itself. In the field of parks and recreation, there's often a high degree of reluctance to pursue cutting-edge innovation for fear of rocking institutional boats. But the following case studies demonstrate that it's not only possible, but often rewarding, to go out on a limb with good ideas. As you will see, creative thinking among park leaders is as wide-ranging as the functions agencies perform.

Starting Conversations

Across the board, innovators start conversations. In the case of Chicago's painted landscape, Schwerner stresses, the point was "simply to draw people's attention to the trees. Chicago is a place filled with trees. And people become a little prone to disregard them, because they're just here. Like the street is here. ...And I think that this project caused people to think about the trees. Caused people to think, well, why are those trees not as good as other trees?"

The way Schwerner sees it, the painting of those invasive-species trees "turned something that was a throw-away into something that was remarkable." And, he adds, "because we did not call it anything—because we



Adam Schwerner, left, Director of Natural Resources/Liason to The Museums in the Park, and Michael Kelly, Chicago Park District Superintendent pose with painted trees at the south lakefront beach and harbor. Schwerner came up with the idea to save dead trees, paint them, and mount them in concrete footings.

curated the colors...chose those colors in that location—it was also an art installation." As for those residents who disliked the park district's art installation or felt it was degrading to nature, Schwerner says he respects their point of view and does not argue.

"The important thing is, we started a conversation about something that was not a valuable resource...but that became one."

Supporting an "Off-the-Map" Style

Schwerner's fascination with art and urban landscape experiments may be unconventional for a park operations manager, but his "off-the-map" style is, he says, strongly supported by his boss, Chicago Park District General Superintendent/CEO Michael Kelly.

Bipolar Power

Arizona State University—School of Community Resources & Development

FACULTY ASSOCIATE: Vern Biaett CFEF

INNOVATION: The "Love Bipolar" Creative Brainstorming Method

SUMMARY: A simple, but highly effective, creativity technique can enhance basic brainstorming to generate a wealth of ideas.

In my Special Event Programming course, students are introduced to a number of methods in order to release their creative abilities. These include such standard brainstorming principles as "The Six Colored Hats," "The

Power of Three," and the "Blue Ocean" strategy. Last year, a new technique came to me while I was listening to Katy Perry's hit single "Hot and Cold." The refrain includes the lines, "You're hot and you're cold, you're yes and you're no, you're in and you're out, you're up and you're down. You're wrong and you're right, you're black and you're white, we fight we break up, we kiss we make up ... Love bipolar."

The principle of my song-inspired, "Love Bipolar" technique is simple: Take an idea or something you do currently

and then try and brainstorm the opposite. When I've done this as an in-class exercise, students have generated many, many opposites—just like in the song. Here's a recent example from class:

QUESTION: "How could you change the basic carnival-style food trailers often used at community events?"

RESPONSES: Ideas flowed as if a dam had burst and included everything from having no food; to sack lunches for trading; to food trucks; to caterers; to using local school cafeteria cooks; to having only

The supportive environment, Schwerner says, "has been very liberating for me. It's given me permission to think more broadly."

One recent project is the April installation of 18 large painted trees at the city's brand-new 31st Street Harbor Building on the south lakefront. In creating the \$130-million facility, the park agency realized some beautiful, mature trees would have to be cut down. So, Schwerner says, "we chose 18 trees. And we reserved those. The bark of those trees was removed and then they were painted and installed at the new Harbor Building....It was a way of being respectful of them, of reusing them."

Schwerner says his agency's innovation-supporting culture has led not only to his own professional growth, but to a sense of pride and excitement throughout the department as well. "It's saying *yeah*, we can be current, and we can do stuff that's sort of edgy. We can support it, and we can be okay." He adds that when he stops by to visit the 31st Street painted-tree installation, tourists, police officers, and bicyclists stop by wanting to know more about the project.

"When your sense of your city is that cool stuff is happening and being done by your government, it feels great."

Nurturing Innovation

Innovative initiatives like Schwerner's require an organizational culture that values and nurtures new ideas.

Paul Gilbert, Executive Director of the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (NVRPA), says this precept is more than just common sense—it is backed by libraries of leadership research. Gilbert, who teaches a course on organizational innovation within George Mason University's Parks, Recreation, and Leisure Studies department,

offers his students digests of research findings on leadership and innovation.

"In study after study," he says, "when leadership shows that they are not interested in new ideas, innovation shuts down. Why should you? It's not going to be rewarded....I think organizations can get stuck in the status quo without even knowing it."

Conversely, when an organization actively encourages and rewards groundbreaking ideas, innovation tends to thrive and become the norm. Gilbert takes lessons from all this research: Under his leadership, NVRPA has formally identified innovation as one of the organization's core values. And tangible incentives, such as annual employee recognition awards, are based upon demonstrations of innovative thinking. Gilbert says that when core values lead to new ways of thinking, fresh ways of doing business become more and more apparent. He offers NVRPA's approach to revenue as an example:

"For quite awhile, we thought that to generate any new revenue we had to build a new facility. That was the only choice. What we realized...is that that's just one out of a number of avenues. You can actually do a whole lot in thinking about the customer and their experience and adding more onto it."

Park leaders like Chicago's Adam Schwerner and Michael Kelly and Northern Virginia's Paul Gilbert pursue innovation as an avenue to heightened public engagement and maximized resources. The case studies that follow document how agencies of all sizes and demographics that are seeing similar rewards to challenging "business as usual." And, in the process, they are changing and enriching the public's experience of parks.



Vern Biaett and students

chocolate; to ... well, the list went on and on.

Although the concept of opposites sounds undemanding, I have found that it generates a greater number of ideas than standard brainstorming. The group becomes more engaged, participates more actively, and has more fun.



TIP: Begin the brainstorming session by playing an easy-to-find YouTube video of the song that has printed words instead of the music video. Talk about opposites for a few minutes and then be prepared for an avalanche of ideas.



CHALLENGE: The only challenge I've had to overcome is making sure to introduce the other creative methods first so that they are not completely overwhelmed by the Love Bipolar brainstorming approach.