



Conflict sparks innovation, business expert says

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By Julia Bauer

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GRAND RAPIDS TOWNSHIP -- When creative minds in corporate America scramble for that next big "Aha!" product, they are likely to hit on it faster through friction than congeniality.

Conflict is crucial to foment innovation, said Jeff DeGraff, associate professor of management education and innovation dean with the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business.

DeGraff led off a day filled with innovation experts in town Tuesday for the Product Development and Management Association of West Michigan's annual conference at the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park.

"Some organizations are far too interested in getting along," DeGraff said. "It's not like 'Leave it to Beaver.' It's more 'Roseanne.' "

With a bachelor's degree from Western Michigan University, DeGraff knows both sides of the state. He worries about a deepening divide between them.

That's not the only stumbling block for a revival of the state's economic vitality. Manufacturing, both automotive and heavy industry, are winding down across the state, DeGraff said.

"How do we push out the old in Michigan? It all begins with the culture. We need to swap out some leaders, change the gene pool," he said.

Next, the state should pick three or four high-potential industries and stick with them, DeGraff said.

"In the innovation game, it's ill-advised to try to boil the ocean," he said. "The challenge is we try to do everything at the same time."

Another worry is the flight of talented young people from the state.

Although Michigan clearly needs to move from its old economy to something new, still to be determined, the Grand Rapids region is bucking the downward trend, DeGraff said.

To get some sense of the future, he urged product developers to mull what things don't make sense.

Where is there conflict or incongruity?

"That's a great predictor of opportunity," he said. "Every time you solve a problem, you create a product."

Put another way, he urged innovators to look for moving trends: the booming growth in China's economy, the miniaturization of pocket PCs, drop-in doctors, pharmacists at places such as Wal-Mart, or the card that lets DeGraff skip long lines at airports.

"I call it the 'I'm Not a Terrorist' card," DeGraff said, laughing.

He drew a distinction between typical business executives and those focused on new products.

"Leading is making what you want to have happen, happen," DeGraff said. "Leading innovation is about

building the bridge as you walk over it.

"It's about being mindful of what you didn't expect that emerged, and capitalizing and translating it into something that is good and true and valuable."

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