

Good Ideas



The founder of the Dayton Engineering Laboratories Company, the outfit that was to become Delco, was a man by the name of Charles Kettering. That's his picture there on the cover of Time magazine. Kettering was an American inventor, engineer, businessman, and the holder of 186 patents. In addition to his work at Delco, he was head of research at General Motors from 1920 to 1947. Kettering was renowned for the practicality of his inventions. As he said, "I didn't hang around much with...the executive fellows. I lived with the sales gang. They had some real notion of what people wanted."

Early automobiles required a hand crank for starting. Occasionally, when the spark lever was not properly set, the hand crank kicked back, causing serious injury: a broken wrist, arm, or shoulder. On a winter night in 1908, the result was much worse. Byron Carter, founder of Cartercar, came across a stalled motorist on Belle Isle in the middle of the Detroit River. He gallantly offered to crank the car for the stranded driver. When she forgot to retard the spark, the crank kicked and broke Carter's jaw. Complications developed, and Carter later died of pneumonia. When Cadillac chief, Henry M. Leland, heard the news, he was distraught. Byron Carter was a friend and the car that kicked back was a Cadillac. "The Cadillac car will kill no more men if we can help it," he told his staff.

He called Charles Kettering. The engineers at Delco worked around the clock to solve the problem. Leland approved their revolutionary electric starter and generator for his 1912 model and placed an order for 12,000 units. The same basic technology is still used today in modern automobiles.

Good ideas can come from any number of places. The end-user of a technology is invaluable when it comes to what does or doesn't work. Sales and marketing types in the field are classic sources for this "voice of the customer" feedback. Knowledgeable engineers are equally valuable sources of good ideas—especially when it comes to clever ways to solve a problem. Often, a good idea can come from someone outside a system or industry, as folks "inside a bubble" can tend to be influenced by ingrained taboos and traditions.

I have noticed here at Glenair that many of our best ideas originate with team members who are just plain not afraid to suggest a new way to tackle an old problem—regardless of what role they play in the organization. I absolutely cherish this behavior (what some folks call "acting like an owner"). Linus Pauling said "the best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas." That sounds about right to me.

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