

Tapping into Your Employees' Big Ideas – and Getting Them to Think Like Owners

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Every organization is looking for the “next big thing” that will help address long-standing issues, resolve complex problems, and push us to greater levels of success. Most often, there is not one big thing that can solve all the problems. Instead of expecting some business superhero or new methodology to sweep in with *the* answer, we need to look closer to home. Alfred P. Sloan, the legendary former president and chairman of General Motors, said, “All organizations are fundamentally comprised of physical assets, finances, and people. Physical assets can be ordered on the phone. A call to a banker can get more money. Only in its people can an organization be unique. Therefore, the only sustainable competitive advantage lies in an organization’s people.”¹ It’s a message HR leaders have consistently carried forward - sometimes with great success and sometimes with frustration and rejection.

Organizations like to say, “People are our most valuable asset.” In reality, most simply do not capitalize on their human resource capabilities. Yet people are the common element that will help any organization advance through this

than ever a source of critical skills and knowledge – people are our sustainable competitive advantage, and it is imperative that every person in our organizations performs at the highest level. Everything any organization needs to be extraordinarily successful already resides within its workforce – it’s a matter of uncovering the “ordinary greatness” that is found in employees who are fully committed to the organization. Our employees are a storehouse of passion, energy, skills and ideas just waiting to be tapped. By recognizing and reinforcing their ordinary greatness, you help them bring their unrealized potential to the surface and, in doing so, drive extraordinary business results.

HR has the opportunity to both appeal to and display the business acumen that can revolutionize its position in the organization from a transactional personnel function to a strategic business partner. Finding ways to leverage human capital to drive business results must be the compelling priority for every business. Human resources is best positioned to serve as the organizational coach and mentor for maximizing the contributions of every

staff member, and by so doing brings value to the enterprise.

CLAIM OF OWNERSHIP

Ownership means actively looking out for the organization's best interests and its bottom line. Claim of ownership is a commitment from an individual to view the organization as though he or she owned it – not through profit sharing or equity building necessarily, but rather from a sense that the company values its employees and customers and strives to ensure their satisfaction. The most effective companies are those that have figured out that employee ownership is the magic ingredient that can propel an organization to extraordinary success.

Inherent in ownership is the concept of maximizing discretionary effort. Although many organizations have implemented waste-reducing initiatives such as Lean and Six Sigma, these initiatives fail to address the greatest waste in any business – the failure to tap into the discretionary effort of the workforce.

In the midst of the new economic norm, business leaders must make leveraging the discretionary effort of every employee the number-one strategic goal of the organization. Organizations that are well positioned now and for the future understand that tapping into the discretionary effort of every staff member is our single greatest opportunity for survival and

long-term viability. There is simply not the money and resources to be wasted on staff that does not give 100 of their available effort.

So imagine – what if every individual, every leader, every team in your organization was giving 100 percent or more? What would it look like? What would the organizational climate feel like? What business results could your organization achieve?

Leaders in high-performing organizations understand what we refer to as “owning the walk to the car.” That is, as leaders leave work each day and reflect on how the day went, they must be able to feel confident that they have encouraged excellence, coached for high performance, and removed barriers to success so that their employees were able to do their best. Making a commitment that everyone should leave work at the end of the day and be able to say “I did my best” or “I gave my all today” or “I made a significant difference” will ensure business success.

TAPPING INTO EMPLOYEES' IDEAS

The ability to continuously generate fresh ideas is a trait of high-performing organizations. The best ideas to move the organization forward aren't necessarily found in the offices of the executives, but by those closest to the work.

Management expert Peter Drucker said, “One has to assume first, that the individual human being at work knows better than anyone else what makes him or her more productive...even in routine work, the only true expert is the person who does the job.”² Frontline people in our organizations, men and women who are closest to the customer, have a clear understanding of what works and what doesn’t, and what will please the customer and what won’t. This kind of knowledge comes from doing the work. When workers demonstrate their commitment through their energy, enthusiasm, and passion for excellence, they search for ways to do things better. If just 5 percent of the ideas, improvements, and solutions swimming around in the minds of your employees were acknowledged, considered, and implemented, your organization would change in remarkable ways.

Encouraging employees to come up with new ideas and offer suggestions to do things more efficiently and cost-effectively is the work of leadership. Tactically, we must move away from the classic suggestion boxes that hang on the wall gathering dust to interactive forums that capture, refine, and synthesize ideas and suggestions from employees. Formal and informal ideation programs that engage employees in meaningful conversations that reinforce their roles in the success of the organization. The most successful employee

ideation programs we have seen include the following elements.

Unwavering Commitment from Leadership

A recent study indicates that only 41% of employees think their senior management supports new ideas and new ways of doing things. Leaders must be in the forefront encouraging employees to share their ideas and suggestions, and they must acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of staff. Leader visibility is critical to building the trust and respect needed for employees to feel comfortable offering their ideas and suggestions.

Deeply embedded within the culture of the Toyota Motor Corporation is the philosophy of *genchi genbutsu*, translated as “go and see.” Leadership at all levels believes in going to the source to find the facts to make the right decisions, build consensus, and achieve goals. The source to help us overcome many of the challenges of developing and sustaining high performance is our employee base.

Having the Right Conversations

Leadership that actively engages employees in conversation about improvement opportunities will be rewarded with innovative ways to solve problems and new approaches to creating excellence in the

workplace. The following questions are suggested as a start to ongoing conversations with employees:

1. *What would make this a better place to work?* One of the most important aspects of any well-run business is employee retention. If your employees are happy and satisfied, they stick around, meaning less time and money spent recruiting and training new employees. Happy employees are also more productive and do better work. If they like the place they work, and feel as though their needs and concerns are being addressed, they are more likely to want to do what is in the company's best interest.

Managers often shy away from asking this question for fear of what the answer might be. Most of the time, they are surprised by the answers they receive. It's often the little things that matter most to employees, and the changes are often minor and very cost effective. It may be something as simple as making sure that the water cooler stays stocked in the break room or keeping the temperature in the office regulated throughout the seasons. The answers you get to this question will most likely not be outrageous requests, and your employees will appreciate the opportunity to be heard.

2. *How can we enhance customer service?* It's easy to get caught up in the daily grind of running a business and forget that one of the very basics

that built that business was great customer service. The trick is to stay connected to the people in your organization who live and breathe it every day. They are the ones who best know your customers. For example, at one organization, the staff kept receiving complaints from customers about their business hours not being convenient. Had the owner never asked his staff what they were hearing from their customers, he never would have known that his store hours weren't convenient.

Employees are a wealth of information regarding how customers interact with our organizations. They observe countless opportunities for improvement in their day-to-day activities. For example, an employee at a health-care facility noticed that many of the elderly patients were stopping to rest against the wall down some of the hospital's longer hallways. The employee suggested that the hospital place benches in the longer hallways so that elderly patients who were struggling to walk would have a place to sit and rest. Although the benches may seem like an obvious solution to the problem, their impact reached much further than offering a place of respite for patients. The benches not only provided a place for elderly patients and those who were physically challenged to catch their breath, but they also provided an opportunity for hospital staff to stop and talk with the patients who were resting. This

increased the staff/patient communication and added an extra boost to overall customer satisfaction. Ask your staff how they would improve customer service. What do the customers complain about most? What do they seem to like? You may be surprised at what you hear!

3. *What would you do away with?*

Just because a policy or process exists in your organization, it doesn't mean that it's necessary. As a business grows and evolves, the needs change, meaning the rules and regulations that were vital at one time may now be antiquated and futile, only serving to cause extra work and headache for your employees.

A successful manufacturing corporation had experienced tremendous growth over the past five years and was struggling with transitioning from the informal processes and systems of a small company to more formal operations that would support the company's growth. In an effort to identify solutions, the HR department asked employees to suggest ways to improve the department's efficiency. An employee suggested that the company set aside its practice of conducting background checks internally and begin outsourcing background checks for new hires. On investigation of the idea, the company learned that an inordinate amount of staff time was being allocated to a laborious process for conducting background checks. The process had

worked when the company was smaller but was not sustainable for the larger company. On implementation of this new system, the company benefitted in several ways: each staff member in the HR department who was tasked with completing background checks was able to save half of his or her work time and reallocate to other duties in the office, make the department more efficient overall. In addition, the cost of outsourcing the background checks was less than the cost of the staff time that was being spent doing them internally, and the background checks were received much faster through the outsourcing agency, improving overall efficiency and satisfaction among staff in the department.

The best way to identify these kinds of opportunities is to ask your employees for their opinions. Ask if they could do away with any one thing—be it a policy, paperwork, your regular morning meeting, or something else—what would it be and why? Again because many of them are doing these tasks every day, it's much easier for them to see when a process is ineffective or unnecessary. Hearing them out may save you time and money in the long run.

Too often we allow ourselves to get caught up in the things we think we should be doing rather than really taking a look at what works and what doesn't. Not only does your business constantly change over time, but so do your clientele and the economy. The

ability to streamline your business by ridding yourself of tired and outdated tasks and procedures will make both you and your employees happier in the long run and will help all of you run a better business.

4. *What would you do if you were footing the bill?* Ask anybody whose money he or she would prefer to spend and the answer is sure to be the same: someone else's. As a leader responsible for the bottom line, this can be a scary thought. Although spending an extra \$50 a month on paper products may not seem like much to an employee, the extra \$600 per year could be better allocated to support the company goals.

We are all much more conservative when spending our own hard-earned money, and helping your employees to look at the company's money as their own could save you big bucks in the long run. Have your employees sit down and look at the money that is spent in each department. Ask them to imagine that money coming out of their own pockets (or paychecks!). Then have them help you brainstorm ways to cut costs and eliminate unnecessary expenses. If they were paying for the coffee cups in the break room, would they be more likely to reuse their cups for refills. By giving the people in your organization a sense of ownership over the way the money is spent, you'll open yourself up to finding new ways to reduce, eliminate, or avoid unnecessary costs.

5. *What is working well, and how can we make it even better?* All too often we focus only on what *isn't* working in our organizations, and we forget to consider the things that are going well. The reality is that it's important to also look at what does work and figure out why. By doing so, organizations can find ways to improve on those systems and can use them as a guide in other areas of the business.

Ask your employees what they think is working well in your company. Have them make a list of the things that make their job easier or help make them more successful and the reasons why they think that is. Then be sure to ask if there are ways that you can improve those things. How could they be even better? What will help them to continue to be successful? By focusing on the positive, you will find that you will come up with even more solutions than by simply concentrating on what doesn't work.

Linked to Current Business Challenges

We recently worked with several organizations that were forced to consider major layoffs. Each decided to take the challenge to employees and solicit their ideas of ways to reduce costs throughout the system. The parameters were to save money while minimizing layoffs and keeping patient care a priority. One

organization avoided layoffs entirely by achieving over \$15 million in employee-generated cost savings ideas. Another organization reduced the actual number of layoffs by 75% and created new processes that improved the patient care experience.

No Idea Is Considered Too Small

Lots of little ideas can be combined to have a significant impact on the organization. A suggestion to print business cards for the organization only on a set date each quarter to take advantage of a volume discount saved the organization \$300 a year. If 20 employees find similar cost savings, the organization can save \$6,000 a year or \$60,000 over a ten-year period.

In the on-site cafeteria at one organization, an employee noticed that people were taking more silverware than needed simply because they had to select their silverware before selecting their food. Diners were unsure which silverware they might need to eat their meals and, therefore, chose all three options (spoon, fork, and knife) every time. An employee offered a simple solution: move the silverware to the end of the cafeteria line so that diners would select only the silverware they needed. The silverware was used by everyone at the company, every day. Having it at the end of the line reduced waste, because people took only the utensils they needed. The

solution can work in any cafeteria. If real silverware is used, the solution cuts down on the amount of time it takes for staff to wash the used (and unused) silverware. For those that use disposable silverware, this cuts down on waste and the cost of all the unused silverware that is unnecessarily thrown away.

System to Capture and Report on Ideas

Gone are the days of the suggestion box that served as the black hole for employee ideas. There must be an effective, user-friendly way to gather ideas, process the ideas and track the successes. Feedback to employees on the status of their ideas is critical to developing the trust needed to continue encouraging ideas and suggestions. It is the leader's responsibility to keep employees informed on the status of their ideas.

Employee Collaboration to Refine and Implement Ideas

Everyone wants to know their work matters and their ideas count. Build on that and create a sense of urgency by incorporating the following:

Vision Week. This is a strategy adapted from one used by the manufacturing industry. Vision Week sets a concentrated time frame for educating employees

about a particular business challenge and soliciting their ideas and suggestions. Leaders hold forums to describe the challenge and what overcoming it will mean for the organization. Employees respond by submitting suggestions. A team evaluates the suggestions and develops employee-based teams that investigate the ideas most likely to affect the challenge.

The Gallery Walk. The Gallery Walk can be a fun alternative to the traditional Q & A format for getting employee input. Here's how it works: Workplace scenarios are posted on a series of flip charts set up in a hallway or meeting room. As participants read through each scenario, they jot down their solutions for the issues posted. After everyone has responded to each scenario, small groups get together and discuss the posted solutions. The Gallery Walk is a great interactive way to get your employees' creative juices flowing and get them thinking like owners. Not only are you likely to get several viable solutions that come from individuals themselves, but also once your employees break off into groups, they are usually able to fine-tune and improve

the solutions they've come up with on their own. After one simple exercise, you'll have a great running list of ideas and improvements to implement in your organization.

FOCUS ON THE HARD STUFF

An accusation often thrown at HR professionals by business leaders is that HR deals with the *soft stuff*. Nothing could be further from the truth. We would echo the sentiments of Tom Peters, who said, "The real hard stuff (is) passion, energy, values, character, (and) enthusiasm."³ The survival of any organization depends on whether or not the staff remains engaged and invested in the business by contributing their best ideas. Everything any organization needs to be incredibly successful, now and in the future, already exists within the workforce. Organizations that are able to access and harness the energy, enthusiasm, passion, and commitment of their people align themselves for greatness – even in challenging economic times.

NOTES

1. <http://www.goldstandardmanagement.org/PeopleCapital/PeopleCapital.html>.

2. Smith, G.P. (n.d.). Leading companies to use ideas to boost productivity and cut costs. Retrieved November 13, 2009, from <http://www.businessknowhow.com/manage/useideas.htm>.

3. Peters, T. (2008). Passion! Retrieved November 13, 2009, from <http://www.tompeters.com/blogs/freestuff/uploads/Passion052908.pdf>.

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