



People provide the creativity, innovation and improvement within organisations. So if you want your business to grow and be successful, tapping into this talent is crucial. It may seem a little old fashioned but the suggestion box is still one of best sources of good business ideas.

With increased competition and a demand for better customer service, managers constantly need new ideas for better ways of working. Proactively encouraging employees to generate innovations and improvements through a suggestion box, or staff suggestion scheme, can help achieve company's goals:

- Identify direct savings, cost reductions and efficiencies
- Implement safety improvements
- Improve quality and service to external and internal customers
- Improve communication
- Promote continuous improvement
- Empower staff and improve morale

Of course, suggestions don't always have to be 'the big idea'. Staff may have proposals that only save the company a few pounds but if each employee is able to identify a small saving then the cumulative effect can be huge. Creating a culture that encourages ideas throughout the organisation will focus people on creative ideas, and make them feel motivated and valued – bringing its own reward to the company.

Encouraging participation is the key

The main challenge of any suggestion scheme is to get people to contribute. Typically employees are concerned about the amount of paperwork involved, being ridiculed or believe management will just ignore suggestions.

To secure maximum participation management need a strong communication message that highlights the advantages of the scheme and makes clear all suggestions are welcome.

Successful schemes only require people to make suggestions or identify problems – don't expect people to also have the answer. It is the role of the wider 'team' to solve it using appropriate techniques such as 5-Whys, Kepner-Tregoe, Rapid Improvement Events, Six-Sigma Green belt projects etc.

A word of warning...

Suggestion schemes can backfire spectacularly if they are not managed properly. Failure to follow up suggestions, a lack of commitment from top managers, continually rejecting ideas or leaving one person to deal with all the suggestions are frequent mistakes. Badly run schemes lead to employee apathy and resentment.

The Suggestion Box Process

1. Appoint a Suggestion Scheme Team!

Form a team with the purpose of managing the suggestion scheme and process; ideally they should be from all levels of the organisation. A team lead or co-ordinator should be appointed (not necessarily senior management) with good project and quality management experience.

2. Decide on the length of the scheme

You need to decide how long the suggestion scheme will run – a month, six months, a year or continuously. It can be difficult to maintain the momentum of a continuous scheme but there are advantages as it supports a continuous improvement culture within your company. So put dates in the calendar to re-advertise the scheme periodically throughout the year, such as September after the summer holidays and in January after the Christmas break.

3. Keep the suggestion form simple

Submitting a suggestion should be easy and simple. Don't expect people to write an essay. It is the Suggestion Scheme Team's job to research the suggestion and determine its viability. On large sites have several suggestions boxes in accessible locations or have a central mailbox for emailed suggestions.

4. Good communication

The scheme should have a name and a logo that's instantly recognisable and can be used on posters, leaflets and forms. The scheme should be widely publicised and be part of any new employee induction. When launching the scheme it's very important to focus on the advantages for the employees and answer any concerns they may have.

Regular progress updates on suggestions should be given to employees. Use the most appropriate method; posters and

leaflets on notice boards, staff briefings, the company intranet or articles in newsletters.

5. Review suggestions

Suggestions should be reviewed on a regular basis and the Suggestion Scheme Team should follow some guidelines or an evaluation process. The team should discuss individual suggestions and assess the benefits to the organisation, the ease of implementation, originality, and the overall costs - a cost benefit analysis may be needed. They should also consider any possible impact on stakeholders both negative and positive.

6. Acknowledge Submissions

Don't forget to send a "thank you" note to everyone who submitted suggestions whether successful or not. Lack of acknowledgement is the biggest contributor to the failure of suggestion schemes.

7. Rewards

It's not unusual to provide a monetary reward for successful suggestions – usually linked to any cost savings or improvements in efficiency. Remember though, the Inland Revenue does have rules on the amount that can be awarded.

8. Evaluate the scheme

Periodically the scheme should be evaluated; putting measures in place at the start of the scheme will make this easier:

- Number and types of suggestions made
- Number of suggestions taken up and implemented
- Financial savings made / increases in efficiency
- Rewards/awards made
- Costs incurred by the scheme
- Problems with the scheme

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