

Ear to the Ground: Making the Most of Employee Input

Employees in any organization are the driving force of operations. With staff playing a significant role in service, it's undeniable that they'll have opinions about their work, the organization, policies and procedures, and more.

In many workplaces, though, encouraging and implementing staff suggestions can fall by the wayside. And given the current economic situation, staff may be hesitant to speak up at a time when fresh ideas can be more crucial than ever.

Read on to discover ways to encourage feedback that boosts employee morale and can ultimately work to your team's and organization's advantage.

Benefits of Staff Input

While it may seem easier at times to go along with the status quo, encouraging the free flow of ideas and embracing meaningful change can help transform a good workplace into a great one. Welcoming employee input can:

Improve job satisfaction. Staff members who sense their ideas make a difference will not only feel valued, but also more loyal to the organization.

Create a better work environment. Managers and senior staff members may not completely understand the unique challenges that frontline or junior staff face. Employee input can help generate more relevant and responsive policies and procedures to address specific staff needs.

Foster service excellence. Staff who work on the frontlines of your organization interact directly with customers, consumers and clients and they are the "face" of your organization. They, better than anyone, understand the value of great customer service. Practical suggestions, therefore, can empower your team with the tools to deliver better value and service to your clients and elevate your organization's reputation.

Create a sense of fairness. By collectively developing the strategies and work processes staff use every day (rather than just implementing those directed to them from management and senior staff) you'll promote a more level playing field and avoid creating an "us and them" atmosphere.

Inspire industry improvements. A staff that's encouraged to innovate can be the force that helps build your organization's reputation as a trail-blazer in the industry.

Taking it All In

While it's easy enough to ask for feedback, people may not be forthcoming with ideas if your actions and body language aren't supporting an open-door policy. Become established as someone who welcomes staff input by asking yourself if you demonstrate:

- **Trust.** Staff will be more open to sharing thoughts and ideas with a co-worker whom they can rely on and trust, especially with sensitive issues.
- **Stability.** Being able to react rationally to crisis situations will cause your co-workers to view you in a higher regard. Exhibiting stability encourages staff to approach you with feedback, even if it's about a negative matter.

- **Leadership.** Hiring effective employees will help ensure your credibility as a people leader and will hopefully generate a cohesive team. A team that can work well together will be more willing to share ideas and insights with fellow team members.
- **Openness.** Foster communication with staff by keeping them well-informed. If you keep co-workers “in the dark” or hide information from them, they’ll be less inclined to approach you with an important issue or concern.
- **Visibility.** Managers who hide behind closed doors create a barrier to colleagues and signal that they’re not open to communication. If you often shut your office door or work at a location that is far from your colleagues, make the effort to visit and chat with them during each work day.

Generating Feedback

In the old days, hanging a suggestion box in the lunch room was how many organizations gathered staff input. And while an idea box can still be an effective tool, it may not always generate the type of detailed information you need. It may also prevent you from targeting the conversation toward a certain issue or item of interest.

Ease the flow of information amongst your team by:

Meeting regularly. Use regular staff meetings (i.e. weekly or monthly) to gather input on specific topics or issues.

Going out. Staff outings can encourage conversation in a less-restrictive setting. Whether it’s a team lunch, or a quick coffee, removing the team from the confines of work can be a good way to keep your ear to the ground.

Surveying staff. Create a survey – either on your own or with your organization’s Human Resources Department – to poll employees on ideas related to a specific item or issue. Consider offering incentives or prizes to encourage staff contribution.

Informing employees. If your organization does not have an internal newsletter, consider creating one – either on your own or with Human Resources and communications staff – to keep employees informed on news and events.

Making conversation. If an employee approaches you with feedback, don’t just accept it at face value. Generate dialogue from staff input by asking further questions like, “Why do you feel this way?” or, “What changes would you like to see following this?”

Ideas to Action

The best way to get regular feedback is by ensuring that at least some of the ideas you receive are implemented. Before you get stuck in information overload, consider the following suggestions when taking action:

Organize. As you gather ideas from staff, record them in one central location, rather than scribbling them down here and there. Create an “idea file” with various categories you can refer to.

Pace yourself. Deal with one idea at a time, and break each down into manageable tasks. This will ensure you include all aspects required for completion. If it helps you to plan better, consider creating a timeline for each task required as you implement the idea.

Recruit champions. Give your co-workers a chance to take action in the implementation of their ideas; don't just accept their feedback at face value. Involving your colleagues shows that you value everyone's ideas and try not to follow a "top-down" regime of dictating and delegating.

Assess. Be sure to evaluate and follow up on the implementation of staff ideas to gauge their effectiveness and offer encouraging advice. If your employees see that their suggestions fall upon deaf ears, they may be inclined to stop contributing. Make them feel valued by acknowledging the issues or ideas they raise.

By addressing the issue of employee input you'll help establish yourself as a people leader that values the insights and opinions of your colleagues. More importantly, implementation of employee suggestions can potentially improve service, increase productivity and positively impact the bottom line. As the driving force behind any organization, employees are more than just the fuel that makes an engine run; they're individuals with ideas, opinions and beliefs that matter.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact Shepell·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.

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