

SIX WAYS TO SHUT DOWN EMPLOYEE INNOVATION

By Sherry Knight, President and CEO, Dimension 11 Ltd.



Yoshimuni Tokugawa of Japan is not a familiar name for most of us. In 1721, the eighth shogun posted the following note, "Make your idea known. Rewards are given for ideas accepted." Now, almost 300 years later, very few companies have effective programs to learn about ways to improve business by listening to the employees.

Alan Robinson and Dean Schroeder in the book, The Idea-Driven Organization, say 80 per cent of an organization's performance improvement potential lies with front-line employees. It's their ideas that make the organization push forward.

It was an Air Canada employee that saved the airline \$240,000 a year. An employee noticed its planes were hauling empty wine bottles back to Canada on return flights. "Why not dispose of the bottles at the foreign destinations?" was the suggestion. Air Canada did and it brought savings of almost a quarter of a million dollars per year.

According to the National Association of Suggestion Systems, employee suggestion programs have saved organizations more than \$2 billion in the United States of America. Generally, Canada is somewhat behind the results reflected in the US because of the differences in population. If Canada only sees

10 per cent of the savings experienced by the USA, there would still be huge savings!

Here are ways employee innovation could be shut down in your organization:

1. Don't respond to the idea – whether it is good or bad. When an employee takes the time to suggest an idea for implementation, don't bother to respond and see how quickly one's enthusiasm to help you build your company diminishes! *Solution:* Respond to EVERY submission.
2. Don't respond in a timely manner so employees know they are being taken seriously. *Solution:* Respond within 48 hours of submission.
3. Don't publish the ideas. Now no one can look at these ideas and build on them. There is absolutely no possibility or collaboration when no one knows what is happening. *Solution:* Post the ideas on the internal website.
4. Don't ask for fleshed out submissions so you get half baked ideas which may mean less opportunity for value. *Solution:* Ask for a clear outline of objectives, competitive advantages, level of difficulty for implementation, estimated time lines, costs and revenues, size of the team needed for implementation, and a risk assessment.
5. Don't set up a committee of in-house employees to vet the

submissions. Without a committee employees assume their efforts go into Neverland. *Solution:* Set up a committee of staff and let the entire organization know this is the case.

6. Don't reward the individual who brought forward an idea that helped the organization make or save money. *Solution:* Everyone likes to be recognized – sometimes monetarily. Perhaps a reward of a percentage of the savings in the first year. The most important part here is to have everyone aware of the reward and be critically honest when it comes time to reward.

You don't need an employee suggestion program with all the bells and whistles which we know can sometimes cause more harm than good. What you do need in your organization is a method to gather those stellar ideas that ensure your customers get the best product and service from your organization! Surprising, isn't it – so little has been done in the last 300 years to draw on the expertise of the people who actually do the job. Start today – it's only money you are losing! 📞

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