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Empowering employee ideas: Turning sour grapes into fine wine

by Carrie Salters

According to John Kotter in *Leading Change*, "occasionally a brave and competent soul at the middle and lower level in the hierarchy is instrumental in creating the conditions that can support a transformation."¹ But how are employees empowered to create these conditions? When I ask employees at client sites of various sizes, in diverse business sectors, I often hear the same thing: "I just do what I'm told, when I'm told."

For organizations with safety, quality, or environmental management systems, management is key in implementing change and carrying out the vision, goals, and objectives established by leadership. Kotter suggests that establishing a sense of urgency² is required to create change, but I don't wholeheartedly agree, as prolonged urgency and unattainable goals can lead to burnout over time.

Most managers are trained in the organizational skills to achieve change. The project-based ability to activate various tasks to achieve

the goals: tasks that tell employees what to do and when to do it. These managers often lack moxie as not everyone in management has the charisma to drive change, and those who do often seem intimidating and out of reach to employees.

Managers often come across inventive ideas that could inspire positive improvements. These ideas are not always communicated, or they can be overlooked, underestimated, or worst-case scenario, ignored. Even the most organized manager or hard-working employee may not have the confidence to communicate their ideas.

Ideas not communicated

Issue: Employee ideas aren't communicated to the next-level manager, and subsequently to the leader driving the change, so no one benefits. This lack of communication can often be attributed to an imaginary, but very real, wall — when an employee is not comfortable enough to schedule



Carrie Salters

Freer Consulting Co.

a meeting or knock on the door of management to talk about an idea.

Resolution: Ensure there are routine meetings between the two parties with an open enough agenda to discuss new ideas; place an Idea Board in a common area and routinely check it; create an Idea Box to create an anonymous place for employees to communicate their ideas.

Ideas overlooked

Issue: Employee ideas are communicated, but overlooked by the manager. The manager never makes the time to bring it to the attention of the leader. Often this happens because the tool used for communication is not appropriate or there is not enough perceived time to review the idea.

Resolution: Communicate important ideas in person, not by email. Managers may receive hundreds of emails a day. For an idea to stand out, take the time to thoughtfully write a brief memo highlighting the aspects of the change. Writing it down often helps think it through better. Put the memo on the manager's chair, not in their inbox. No matter the communication tool, require that managers respond to the (non-anonymous) idea with the employee to discuss the pros and cons. The idea may not be accepted, but more

thoughtful communication promotes a company culture that encourages improvement.

Ideas underestimated

Issue: Employee ideas are underestimated. Employee ideas may look bad on paper but could be easy or difficult to implement. Most times you don't really know until you try.


Resolution: Make time to thoughtfully consider every idea that comes to the table. Run it through various scenarios or one where it has the highest likelihood for success. If successful, try it in another department. If it fails, see if the idea can come to fruition with a few adjustments, or move on. Take the time to put in the effort and employees will be more likely to contribute ideas in the future.

Ideas ignored

Issue: Employee ideas are completely ignored. This is the worst scenario that can happen when an employee has an idea for improvement. Ignoring ideas, whether good, bad, or indifferent, is a sure-fire way to ensure that employees will not bring ideas

to the table again. If just one employee idea is ignored, they may end up disgruntled. Other employees in that department, and potentially across the company, might think their ideas will fall on deaf ears. The grapevine is a powerful tool that, if not nurtured, can produce sour grapes.

Resolution: Do not ever completely ignore an employee's idea.

Each and every one of us has control over our time, whether we believe it or not. Prioritize time to review new ideas that promote improvement, however great or small. Employees at all levels need to feel empowered. Encourage them to bring ideas to the table. Consider their ideas. Put in the effort to run them to ground. Do not ignore them. Employees are the roots of the vine that help it flourish, the foundation that fuels growth. If they are underfed, the vine will weaken. It is the responsibility of leadership to create conditions that empower brave and competent souls to succeed and transform the company into a better one...remembering that all it takes are a few sour grapes to ruin a batch of fine wine. 

Endnotes

1. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 49.
2. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), Chapter 3.

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