



Leslie Rose McDonald
President, Pathfinders CTS, Inc.

“ARE YOU LISTENING TO YOUR EMPLOYEES”

Are you listening to your employees? Those who are working at the implementation level of the organization are frequently in the best position to give you insights as to how things might be improved. Unfortunately, management may not solicit (or worse yet - solicit but ignore) input and feedback from employees. For those managers open-minded enough to do so, listening and responding to feedback can significantly improve an organization's functioning as well as strengthen team relationships and increase morale and productivity.

There are many ways to collect this valuable information. In days gone by there was the employee suggestion box that typically hung on a wall outside the cafeteria, which allowed employees the opportunity offer their ideas. Today's version is likely to be sending an email to the President, submitting ideas on a company-wide intranet "suggestion box," or creating an internal task force to address improvement issues.

A time-tested, easy and potentially effective way to get new ideas is to gather a cross-section group of employees together with a company leader and dialogue with them. These gatherings can be formal or informal, creating an open forum for discussion about what is going on in the company, with an exchange of information and ideas. This only works, however, if the person gathering the information is open to hearing the truth, and is genuinely willing to take action on at least some of the ideas.

When employees are asked their opinion from a person of power, they generally "know" from reputation or their own experience if the leader 1) will take the information seriously, 2) has good intentions but will probably not change anything, or 3) is simply going through the motions and having it "on record" that they solicited ideas from their people.

For employees to give open and genuine feedback, they need to feel not only listened to, but safe that nothing will be held against them for being honest. Some employees will only feel that safety when they can get the support of others in the group who are also willing to speak up and reinforce their point of view. Otherwise, they are likely to go through the motions of telling the person what they want to hear, or perhaps remain silent and not speaking up at all.

The essential keys to having people continue to give valuable ideas and suggestions is to 1) thank everyone for their input, regardless of the initial value or feasibility of the ideas. 2) do not dismiss or place value judgements right away 3) always have a timely follow-up communication so that people know that the feedback was given due consideration. 4) where the input would indicate lack of accurate information or misunderstanding, use the feedback as an opportunity to educate or get correct information to the employees 5) announce changes that have taken place as a result of employee input and thank everyone again.

Remember that to solicit information and ideas, and do nothing with them (the "black hole" from the employees' perspective) diminishes the credibility and trust-worthiness of the leader. Regardless of the mode of information gathering - in person, electronically, or even with the good old - fashioned suggestion box, the most important aspect of the process is the intention and follow through to genuinely hear, consider and act on the ideas from these important stakeholders.

(Adapted from the author's previously published column in the Syracuse Newspapers)