



# Employee Involvement Programs Drive Performance

by Gregory P. Smith

Getting employees' ideas and getting their involvement is critical in our rapidly changing world. If your company is going to be competitive, it's mandatory to involve not just hands, but the ideas from everyone in your organization.

Why is it important to capture ideas and suggestions? For starters, the process improves individual motivation and morale. Involvement programs help capture the creativity, energy, and ideas many people have. They also allow departments and individuals to work cross-functionally, and create an environment of learning and constant renewal.

They improve work methods and processes continually, reduce the costs of doing business, improve safety, and reduce accidents. Exchanging ideas always improves communication and the knowledge that top management is open and willing to act on the ideas improves trust.

**Good Idea Boards.** Georgia's Buckhead Ritz-Carlton Hotel promotes employee involvement by letting them write their ideas on an "easy wipe" board in their department. Instead of passing untested ideas up the chain of command, the employee who originates an idea has responsibility for its achievement. They follow a three-step work process: "study it, pilot it, and adopt it."

A quality coach helps each department and its employees with the process. Once an idea is piloted and found worthwhile, it is adopted. Each month the department forwards the best idea to the division and then on to the Quality Office for special recognition.

The department awards cash for the best idea of the month. The best idea of the division gets a higher amount of money or brunch in the hotel's restaurant. At the hotel level, the best idea receives an even higher amount or dinner for two. In addition, the winners receive letters of appreciation and an invitation to a quarterly reception courtesy of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

**Idea Campaigns.** Most suggestion programs fail. Suggestion boxes sit and collect dust and approved suggestions are few and far between. An effective variation to the suggestion program is the Idea Campaign. Over and done with in three weeks, this steroid-enriched campaign generates hundreds of ideas.

The goal is to get at least one idea from everyone in the organization. For the first idea, each person receives a small token of appreciation such as a coffee cup. A second idea is acknowledged with another form of appreciation. At the end of each week, a special award ceremony recognizes everyone who turned in ideas or suggestions. Names drawn from a basket receive other prizes and gifts.

Because the program only lasts three weeks, the program generates a tremendous amount of focused energy and motivation. No one wants to be left out of the program—everyone

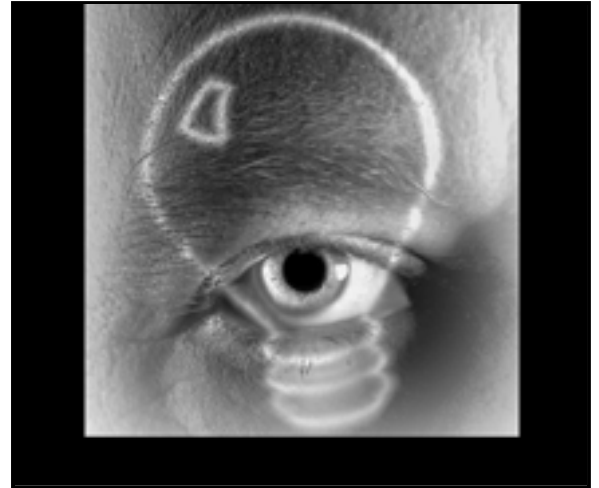


participates. All ideas have to be considered and all suggestors receive instantaneous recognition. For participants, the most powerful force is not the awards, but the feeling that management is listening to their ideas.

**Mini-Kaizens.** Many companies and many Japanese companies use Kaizen, which means continuous improvement. Kaizen processes are found mostly in manufacturing environments, but a Mini-Kaizen, the smaller brother, is appropriate for all organizations seeking ways to engage employees and their ideas.

A Mini-Kaizen (MK) is tightly managed and operates on a compressed schedule. The goal is to finish in one day or less. An MK can be used to map out an administrative process, design a retention plan, or create a customer service strategy. An outside facilitator who is familiar with the MK process is the key to success.

To prevent the meeting from becoming laborious or contentious, members are not allowed to talk during some parts of the brainstorming sessions called "Silent Sorts." Members stand up and move around a lot, which minimizes boredom. At the conclusion, the organization has an implementation plan and everyone owns the design, which speeds up the implementation process.



**Idea Expositions.** The Sony Corporation is well known for its ability to create and manufacture new and innovative products. Each year Sony generates approximately 1000 new products and product innovations. Founder Masaru Ibuka's philosophy for success is "never follow others."

In order to foster the exchange of ideas within departments, Sony's Corporate Research sponsors an annual Idea Exposition. Scientists and engineers display projects and ideas they are working on. Open only to Sony's employees, the exposition lets individuals share ideas otherwise protected by departmental walls.



**Greg Smith** is a nationally recognized speaker, author, and business performance consultant. He has written numerous books and featured on television programs such as Bloomberg News, PBS television, and in publications including *Business Week*, *Kiplinger's*, *President and CEO*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. He is the President and "Captain of the Ship" of a management-consulting firm, Chart Your Course International, located in Atlanta, Georgia. Phone him at 770-860-9464 or visit his web site at <http://www.chartcourse.com>

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