

WHAT MAKES BEST PRACTICE IDEA PROCESSES WORK?

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WHERE ARE WE?

Depending on the level of support for idea processes (suggestion systems and continuous improvement) from top management, there are several barriers that face program today's administrators/champions of these processes:

- Administrators and staff may have so many other responsibilities that their time is fragmented. Their job assignment may be temporary or part time.
- Limited staff resulting in administrators spending too much time doing data entry and not having time to promote or manage it well.
- Difficulties in getting information out to people and coordinating the process.
- Frustrated participants having problems determining the status of their ideas.
- Lengthy evaluations and poor statistics on who currently has the idea.
- Competition among EI or quality processes (e.g., teaming, recognition, safety, continuous improvement).
- Top management may not be truly supporting the process. This may be due to lack of information about the impact of the EI process. They also could have difficulty with the award amounts being paid to participants in relation to what is gained from the program.
- Lack of support from middle management and technical staff because they have different agendas and may see EI as more work with little benefit to them. They may see it as a waste of time.
- Lack of support for training of suggesters, evaluators, supervisors and so forth.
- Lack of technical support for implementing an adequate computer tracking system.
- _____
- _____
- _____



Please write below a list of things you are doing well.

Things We Are Doing Right		
For EI Process: _____		
Date: _____		
	Things we are doing right	What caused it to happen?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

Please write below a list of existing problems or issues that need to be resolved with your suggestion system or idea process. Try to stay as big picture as possible. Then in the right column, try to identify ways software may help or fully solve the problem

Key Issues		
For EI Process: _____		
Date: _____		
	Current Problem	What is Needed to Correct It?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

STRATEGICALLY LINKED

Typically top idea processes are considered strategically important to the well being of the organizations they serve. If idea processes are not an important strategic element, they typically fall under fire in times of budget cuts. A key part of a manager, champion or administrator's role in managing an idea process is insuring that it links to management's strategic goals and is viewed as an asset to the organization.

Below are some thoughts on how to get an employee involvement process better linked with the organization and its goals:

- ◆ **Top management support** - Management supports the process and understands it. This involves getting and maintaining management buy-in. Typically, top idea processes have reporting systems in place that allow management to see how the process is working in their specific areas of responsibility. This type of reporting requires diligent data entry and a strong software package that can handle the reporting needs. Reporting needs to relate to what management needs and should be provided monthly, or at the very least quarterly.
- ◆ **Strategic or organizational goals** – Most organizations have specific goals they are pursuing. Link the idea process to the goals by reports or specific campaigns.
- ◆ **Link to the current business model of the organization.**
- ◆ **Middle management** – Middle managers, like top managers, need to know what the idea process is doing for them.
- ◆ **Promotions or annual reviews** – Including specific performance criteria on annual reviews or promotion assessment sends a strong message to the importance of the process. Participation as a submitter, evaluator, or implementor could be included on these reviews.
- ◆ **Linkages to other Quality or Recognition Activities** – This can include ISO/QS, lean manufacturing, peer recognition, and safety programs.
- ◆ **Accurate Measurements** – We need to know the numbers we are measuring are accurate and which really benefit the bottom line of the organization. Measuring ROI as well as splitting labor and material savings are important for most organizations. Accurately measuring each idea's specific impact may not be practical. An audit for a specific time frame, that carefully measures costs/savings, may be an alternative.
- ◆ **Correct Placement of the EI Team** – The group that manages the idea process needs to be properly placed in an organization. If aligned in the correct department/area, management may better support the process and provide the needed resources.

- ◆ _____

- ◆ _____

STAKEHOLDERS

Below is a list of direct stakeholders in the idea process. Some people may prefer to use the term internal customers instead of stakeholders (this is any customer of the process, not just our actual outside customers). Other stakeholders could be included, based on your own internal needs. For instance, client (the actual person purchasing the product or service) could be included on the list since a key outcome of your process is satisfied clients. We could even tell our clients about the employee-based idea process and how it is helping us serve them better (clients could also be involved in their own idea process). In a similar manner we could include the board of directors, stockholders and the community where the organization resides.

- **Top management** - They need to set the vision for the process and officially support it. Without their support the process will typically only have regional support.
- **Middle management** - This level of management needs to understand the process and have clear goals defined so they will support. If their budgets or staffing are adversely affected by money saving ideas and receive no benefits, they can become a significant adversary to the process, even if the CEO or President openly supports it.
- **Supervisors** - This group can implement approximately 80% of the ideas submitted by employees in their areas. If they are allowed to implement the ideas directly and then share the successes later, it will alleviate much of the paperwork and turn-around time on smaller ideas. To get their support, appropriate training and mentoring may be necessary. Appropriate recognition and/awards are necessary to get this group to fully participate.
- **Evaluators (Process owners or technical experts)** - These are the people potentially doing the evaluations or investigations on major ideas (ideally they should not be involved on smaller locally-implemented ideas). Proper training and support must be given for evaluators so they will be able to take the time to review ideas and not be threatened by people with little technical training turning in ideas. Appropriate recognition and/awards are necessary to get this group to fully participate. In some idea processes, the smaller ideas may be directly handled by the submitter and/or supervisor since they have enough technical expertise to solve the problem (and may be the direct process owner).
- **Submitters** - The people creating the ideas must have a process that is clear and easy for them to use. They need assurances that their ideas will be handled with respect and will not affect their employment status (e.g., if they turn in an idea that essentially makes their job obsolete, the organization will find them another job).

There are several tasks involved in managing an idea process. These tasks may be supported by one person or split between several people. It is important to insure that the people selected for each task are a good fit.

- **Team responsible for monitoring and administering the process** – In many processes there is a team that supports the overall process and may help with evaluation reviews.
- **Clerical staff** – This involves data entry, processing of ideas, pulling paper forms from boxes, bulletin board posting and other clerical activities.
- **Process champion** - The process requires a functional operating champion that acts as an administrator or manager with responsibility for all day-to-day aspects of designing promoting, implementing and operating the system. The functional or operating champion must have support at all levels of management and the executive staff.

- **Supporting champion** – This is the high level manager who openly supports the process as a visible champion. This includes backing up the process when problems occur that require a senior manager. They are available to preside over key events. Programs that have true supporting champion have a greater chance of succeeding.

How does your process support each of these stakeholders? Think about the information (e.g., reports), direct results and recognition that each stakeholder may need.

- 1) Top management
- 2) Middle management
- 3) Supervisors
- 4) Process owners or technical experts
- 5) Submitters
- 6) Team responsible for monitoring and administering the process
- 7) Clerical Staff
- 8) Process Champion
- 9) Supporting Champion

RECOGNITION THAT FITS

Effectively saying thank you to participants, is another element of top idea processes. We need to do this in a way that makes the recipient feel appreciated while keeping within budgets and other guidelines. What approaches we can take will vary significantly from organization to organization and also will change with time.

- ◆ Which stakeholders in the process require recognition? In what form? We typically award submitters in an idea process but ignore evaluators, implementors or other participants.
- ◆ In some circles, cash is 'out'. Find out what works best in your organization – both from what management is willing to pay and what will put a big smile on a participant's face. Cash has low mnemonic benefit but may still be the best solution.
- ◆ Supporting idea generation and long-term participation. Processes such as milestone points help promote long-term participation. Basing participation awards on adoption or implementation can shift from idea generation to idea solutions.
- ◆ Is the award element of your process seen as a cost or as an investment?
- ◆ For idea processes, award calculations need to relate to the direct impact of the idea. It may be more accurate to calculate separate award elements for direct savings and internal labor savings. We may also want to separate cost savings from cost avoidance.
- ◆ How can we make it fun and interesting for participants?
- ◆ Linkage to other recognition and award processes

Some Questions:

- 1) If you have a suggestion system, what other recognition programs exist in your organization?

- 2) What forms of recognition do you use (e.g., points, cash, merchandise, drawings, events)?

- 3) When was the last time your recognition process was updated?

- 4) How many people were involved in designing the recognition elements you manage? Did include a cross section or representatives from your organization (e.g., employee, line management, top management, union)?

MENTORING

Appropriate feedback on the results of an idea is one area that most idea-based employee involvement programs fall short. Without adequate feedback, a participant cannot easily improve. When they decide to participate the next time their input will have a higher quality with feedback. They may also decide not to participate again.

ACCESS

Most participants want easy access to their specific information and may also be interested in overall program statistics. Management and other stakeholders may also want access to information. In the past, this was handled via a telephone call or provided in printed monthly reports. Today we have computer-based solutions that are on-line. This reduces administration time spent answering telephone-based inquiries. Most top performing programs are now on-line or seriously planning for it.

Access can include (your organization needs to review which pieces fit your needs):

- ◆ Entering ideas in a suggestion system or projects in a team-based process. This could eventually include vendor and customer input.
- ◆ Participants checking ideas status.
- ◆ People using the idea database as a research library for future potential ideas. Different plants or facilities could also share information.
- ◆ Following up on assigned ideas (e.g., evaluators or team facilitators).
- ◆ Management running reports on ideas pertaining to their areas.
- ◆ People checking awards they have received.
- ◆ A nominator directly submitting a peer-based award.

REMOVING BARRIERS

Suggestion systems and other employee involvement processes can become bureaucratic nightmares. How do we simplify the process so people want to become involved?

- ◆ Simplify our forms and program guidelines. Often the handbook given to the employee is so complex it can be an immediate turn off.
- ◆ Limit what isn't an acceptable idea.
- ◆ For small ideas, let the submitter and/or supervisor directly implement it.
- ◆ When an evaluator or evaluation team does need to review an idea, simplify the process using matrices or easy-to-use forms asking only for the specific information that is needed.
- ◆ Let supervisors sign off on smaller awards and bypass a committee reviewing every idea.
- ◆ If designing a new process, try to avoid large awards tied to a single idea since it slows down the review process.
- ◆ How many signatures are needed to get an idea approved and awarded? Can you halve that?
- ◆ How many times does an idea have to pass through the central administrator's office? Is this necessary?
- ◆ Go on-line. Time spent doing data entry is time lost promoting the process.
- ◆ With our software tracking systems, are we gathering the right information to let management and our participants know it is working? Track what is needed and remove what isn't.

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