

# Think Outside the Suggestion Box: *encourage creativity in the workplace*

Common sense tells us that the person doing a job is a great resource to identify what might be improved. In fact, many companies have developed suggestion programs to take advantage of this idea. Some have elaborate formal programs; others rely on a simple suggestion box. Despite their differences, most programs follow a basic pattern. Employees submit ideas, generally to solve problems, improve efficiency, or reduce costs. An evaluator, often a supervisor or a panel made up of a cross-section of employees, investigates the idea's usefulness and financial impact. Suggestions are accepted or rejected. If accepted the submitter often receives recognition and an award based on the idea's value.

**Does this encourage creativity?** Studies show that there is a high correlation between the number of suggestions per employee and company success. The more suggestions made, the greater the likelihood of generating good ideas. Employees who are encouraged to be creative will be. Handled well, everyone will like the results.

**What can increase creativity?** Recognize every suggestion - *regardless of whether it's likely to be implemented or has an immediate measurable financial impact.* An approach that only values suggestions for their bottom line result will not work to increase creativity. Recognize all ideas equally – big or small, viable

or not – as soon as possible after the suggestion is made and employees will communicate all their creative ideas.

**Are big changes the key to success?** Many good small ideas can set an organization apart from the crowd. A steady stream of low-budget, quick-to-implement ideas that constantly improve your business can provide your company with a sustainable, long-term advantage. For example, everyone agrees that attracting and retaining customers is one key to business success. Surveys tell us that “feeling appreciated” is the key to earning customer loyalty.

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Consider encouraging your employees to focus on ways to demonstrate customer appreciation. Don't stifle your employees' creativity by limiting your program to ideas with a “big ticket” financial impact. Go for the little gems.

**Will employees stop without a big “payoff”?** Large dollar awards often backfire, undermining teamwork and creativity. The person credited with a

suggestion may be envied and resented by coworkers; people earning large dollar payoffs can threaten management who may, in turn, stifle ideas.

Awards with big price tags are a waste of resources that could be invested elsewhere. Any financial recognition should be viewed as a token of appreciation not compensation. Keeping the dollar value of rewards very modest avoids the pitfalls mentioned above and encourages creativity without breaking the bank.

1. *Clearly communicate company mission, goals and objectives.* Make sure that everyone in the company knows your priorities, major initiatives and challenges. Let your employees know that you need their creativity to be successful. Involve them in every step.
2. *Define guidelines for your suggestion program.* Agree upon a target number of suggestions/employee per time period. The goal should be attainable, based on past performance, but not so easy that employees aren't challenged. Never punish an employee for not making the goal or for making “silly” suggestions. Look at this as a coaching opportunity – a chance for supervisors to empower employees to look critically at their jobs and ways to do things better.

3. *Publicize the program.* Develop a recognizable “brand” for your program – something everyone can associate with the program. Be creative and have fun. This is a great opportunity to tap into employees’ creativity. Inform your customers and suppliers; they’ll appreciate you for your commitment to continuous improvement.
4. *Make the process easy.* Make sure that the program is well understood and that processes are straightforward and timely. Involve your employees in the implementation process.

5. *Acknowledge and recognize all suggestions.* As soon as possible after the suggestion is made, send an acknowledgement. Consider the idea of further recognizing employees who meet or exceed goals. Make sure that employees’ efforts are visible throughout the organization.
6. *Provide timely feedback.* Communicate whether or not each suggestion will be implemented, studied for feasibility, saved for later consideration or is not possible. If a good idea cannot be used, consider challenging the one who made the

suggestion for ideas to overcome barriers. Establish teams to study complex suggestions and create action plans.

7. *Publicize and celebrate your successes.* Put the name of everyone who makes a suggestion into a drawing for a small reward. Make the most of your successes; include them in your company newsletter, post them on a bulletin board or your Intranet. Make sure your customers know about contributions your employees make to the success of your organization.