

Staff

Idea Storms



You know how important it is to focus on not working in your business, but have you ever considered letting your staff do the same? They also come to their work day after day but have you ever asked for their ideas about improvements, problems or issues?

If you think of your staff as *just* being there for customer service, and management is the *real* brains, you are greatly mistaken. Staff can often give insights into issues that would take management years to discover. Don't let yourself or your management team be fooled by the prestige of their job title - the best managed, most successful companies often have a very humble CEO that spends time grilling staff for their ideas, insights and advice. They realise there is no room for ego, just the love of people and the ability to spot and then utilise talent.

The CEO of the Ritz Carlton Hotel chain, Horst Schulz, practices this. At staff inductions he tells them "I am the president, but you are far more important. If I don't turn up for work on Monday no one cares, if you don't bags don't get carried, food is not served, beds are not made - the place falls apart. Who runs this place? Not me: you." Also, everyone has authority to spend \$2000 to fix a customer problem without managers' approval. This hasn't bankrupted them; it turned them into a benchmark of service in the hospitality industry. Horst has turned the pyramid upside down - staff come before management and its working a treat.

Take a step back

'When [your] hearts on fire you get smoke in your eyes', which means sometimes you are too close to your own business to see its faults or viability, and this is why you need to ask others. For example, the TV show *Dragons Den* often has prime examples of ideas that

are creative and unique but also silly as the inventors haven't stepped back to consider its viability; they got too swept up in the product.

Idea storms can reveal:

Differences in knowledge. Everyone adds up to a different sum that is made up of their experiences and knowledge. Be curious about ideas - curiosity is the mind on tip toe. As Dee Hock, the creator of Visa, said "The problem is never how to get new innovative thoughts into your mind but how to get the old ones out". When you've got a problem, try putting on someone else's hat - how would a hairdresser, plumber, doctor or nun solve it?

Differences between generations. At Proctor and Gamble you aren't allowed into the top 200 staff positions if you don't have a mentor under 21, and remember Bill Gates was 22 when he founded Microsoft.

Differences between industries. Seeking ideas from different industries is very powerful, just as Heathrow airport did - they found the answer to their queuing problems at Disneyland. The biggest breakthroughs are often made by people working outside the field in question. Einstein was a patent clerk when he developed his theory of relativity; the electric chair was invented by a dentist and the electric fence by a New Zealand farmer who attached wires to his car battery to stop horses from rubbing against his shiny new car. A sculptor created the ballpoint pen, the automatic telephone was invented by an undertaker and a journalist created parking metres! Generalists can often see more sides to a problem than specialists.

How to do a staff idea storm

Tackle it in a way that suits your business. It can be done as a paper survey, by intranet, or at a team brainstorming session. You can make it casual - for example, take them all out for tea or put on an after work BBQ. The key is to put all your cards on the table.

Tell them you want:

- 1 The business to be amazing and you can't do that without them.
- 2 To create a team where everyone is equal and there's no 'them' and 'us' between management and staff.
- 3 Them to feel comfy coming to your office with ideas they have.
- 4 Them to be fulfilled, to have their talent nurtured and to have the role they want.

Give some topic prompts such as marketing, retail space, customer service, customer loyalty, working conditions, industry developments, KPI's and team issues, then let them comment on whatever else they like.

So many ideas so little time...

Tony Highland, a leader at Barclays Bank, asked all 2167 people on his staff that report to him what they wanted from their employment at the bank. All of them more or less said these six things: a challenge, responsibility, trust, reward, learning and fun. So after you have had an 'idea storm', and you find yourself swimming in new ideas, let your staff champion the ones they are passionate about - issue them the challenge, trust them to do it and give them the authority. Always delegate authority but keep responsibility - too many managers do this vice versa.

If you give people control over the circumstances of their work they will be engaged, they will take pride in the project and will be upskilling. People support what they help to create - recognition is a powerful motivator.

Don't need an idea storm?

You may think you have an open office but does your staff agree? Many management teams *claim* to listen but they actually don't. If you haven't had a staff member bringing ideas to you in the last month you probably haven't been listening, because if staff feel valued they speak up. Don't ask for staff

feedback or ideas if they are only going to be responded to with a very PC 'fob off' and a "thank you for your feedback". If you ask for it you have to care and take action. If the idea is not viable explain why and maybe explore alternatives. If you don't provide feedback to the person who gives you an idea they may be less likely to speak up again. To create a culture of innovation and ideas staff feedback and teamwork is vital.

Don't have staff?

If you are a soloist you can turn to those you've met through networking for an idea storm. Shout everyone a coffee or put on a morning tea, tell them you are pondering strategy and want to hear their ideas. Getting people with a portfolio of skills together can be very insightful. Some people set up such 'committees' to exchange business support and ideas regularly.

Imagine what would happen if...

Banks did idea storms - I bet life insurance wouldn't be pushed at you when you just pass the automatic doors if they utilised idea storms. Struggling companies might get a new lease of life and clarity on a strategy that every one can work towards.

Don't let the gold within your staff or business lie dormant - dig it out and put it to good use. Our mothers were right - we have two ears and one voice, which should be used accordingly. By doing this within our teams we can learn stuff we can't see ourselves and therefore drastically improve our businesses.

By Allison Toner



Allison Toner teaches managers where their ears are and how to use them. Her company Niche Forecasting create staff surveys that dig for the truth, create a modern workplace and satisfied staff.

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