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Tapping your best resources to improve your operation

By Marie Peeler

As a mailing operations leader, your key responsibility is to ensure that your operation not only survives, but thrives by constantly evolving and improving. The most direct means of doing this is by cultivating, harvesting, and utilizing the collective wisdom that you already have within the walls of your operation.

Every day, people at all levels of your organization work on daily tasks, challenges, and opportunities. For eight hours a day (more or less), they are immersed in the stuff of your operation. And they could tell you a lot about it, if you let them. They could figure out even more, with the right encouragement.

Unfortunately the people that could help you the most may think that you aren't interested. Many leaders erroneously leave that impression. Perhaps it is the pressure that leaders feel to have all the answers that causes them to appear aloof to feedback.

Sometimes, leaders are afraid to ask others in their organizations for their input for fear that team members, particularly those at the front lines, will come forward with ridiculous suggestions or unrealistic expectations.

I ran into this when I was helping an organization plan a conference for a group of middle level leaders. Although the intent was to allow attendees to set the agenda and discussion topics, the senior leaders initially wanted me to restrict the discussion topics because they were afraid that the conference attendees would try to solve every problem by "giving everyone a big raise" or other "silly things that we can't do."

Most employees understand reality better than we give them credit for. Given the opportunity for meaningful input and involvement, most will rise to the occasion. In this case, we moved forward without restrictions and had a great conference. Attendees knew what needed to be discussed and did so in a responsible way that moved the organization closer to its goals.

If you are ready to do a better job of tapping into this valuable resource, here's a few tips to get you started.

Check your ego long enough to truly listen.

Don't unwittingly thwart the thinking of others by shooting down ideas that don't fit your preconceived notions. Remember to honor the experience of those around you by listening.

As a leader you must hear information and opinions – even when they point to weakness in your organization – without being defensive. Otherwise, you will miss valuable information because others will be too afraid of being on the receiving end of a bad reaction.

Ask learning questions.

Albert Einstein supposedly said, "Curiosity is more important than knowledge." Stay curious and exercise that curiosity by asking learning questions. Learning questions are those questions that you ask because you genuinely don't know the answer – or you believe you do know the answer but you are willing to suspend your belief in order to learn what others think.

Take a risk.

When you encourage people to think and to come up with ideas, you have to face the fact that not all ideas will be good ones. Some ideas will seem good at first, but will fail. This seems like a risky proposition for a leader. It is even riskier for the employee if the organization is known to punish failures. As a leader, your best option is to accept the risk and lead a culture where failures are learning opportunities.

Take team members out of their silos.

To promote even greater creative thinking, provide opportunities for team members to regularly work on problems and challenges outside of their functional areas.

Even senior team members lose sight of the big picture when they are exclusively enmeshed in the issues and priorities of their own areas.

When I ran a direct mail company, I would routinely have new sales people spend a week working in the mail plant. Subsequently, they consistently had better, more creative (and executable) production ideas, than the sales people who had not had this experience.

Orchestrate opportunities for people to offer their best thinking

The conference that I mentioned above used the 'Open Space' concept which is designed to elicit the best thinking at a grassroots level by allowing participants to create the topic agenda in real time and attend (and leave) sessions at their own discretion. It looks a bit like organized chaos but, amazingly, it works. You can learn more at www.openspaceworld.org, an informational website about the concept.

You don't need have a full blown conference, however, to encourage people to offer their best thinking so that you and your organization can benefit. Any setting where you make it clear that you believe that others hold the wisdom and that you are there to listen can work. The trick is to create the right culture for thinking and sharing.

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