SOMETIMES A GREAT Notion

Have you given any thought to implementing an **employee think tank** that could improve your operation's productivity and make your employees happier?

By Becky Mollenkamp

MANAGING PEOPLE

For as long as anyone could remember, Elmcrest Country Club had left its greens mowers sitting out all winter, taking up a huge amount of space in the storage facility. The bad habit finally ended when the course mechanic suggested that certified superintendent Rick Tegtmeier buy a rolling rack featured in a catalog. The new cart allows one person to move 10 mowers without a two-wheeler and creates streamlined storage for the equipment.

"He came up with a quick solution to an age-old problem we've always had," says Tegtmeier, whose course is based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
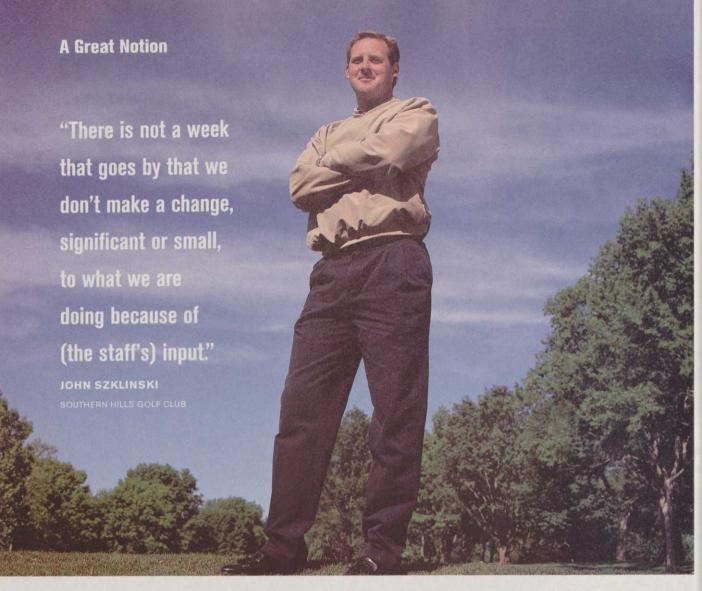
Workers often see problems and opportunities that their bosses miss. And it doesn't take much prompting to get employees to offer their two cents.

Why take time to get employee input? A study by Development Dimensions International shows that organizations with high employee involvement experienced a 70 percent improvement in customer service and a 65 percent improvement in overall productivity. Oh, yeah, worker satisfaction grew by 45 percent.

To create your own employee think tank, experts suggest implementing a formal system that focuses on small ideas, includes quick follow-through and recognizes employees for their efforts.

Tegtmeier has a weekly staff meeting at which the group discusses problems and brainstorms solutions. He says the crew comes up with usable ideas nearly every week.

"They are the ones out there doing it; I'm just the manager," he says.

"There is not a week that goes by that we don't make a change, significant or small, to what we are doing because of (the staff's) input."

JOHN SZKLINSKI
SOUTHERN HILLS GOLF CLUB

If your employees aren't offering up ideas on a regular basis, it's time to ask why.

"There's obviously a barrier there," says Dean Schroeder, co-author of "Ideas Are Free: How The Idea Revolution is Liberating People and Transforming Organizations" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004). "[Apparently] employees don't think their ideas are welcome, there isn't a natural process in place, or something is sending a message that ideas aren't welcome. Sometimes you have to go out of your way to make sure everyone truly believes that ideas are welcome."

Schroeder says managers must create a system in which all ideas are captured, acknowledged and, when worthy, implemented. They need to be smart about the systems they choose. Suggestion boxes too often are black holes. Ideas go in (many of which are not useful) and follow-up is nil. Likewise, simply having an open-door policy is typically not enough. Busy superintendents are rarely in the office, and when they are, employees are often too intimidated to bother their bosses with small ideas.

You may use a simple written form or opt for group discussions. Whatever method you choose, the key is to make the system a routine part of your business and to not let ideas fall through the cracks. Also, be sure the idea-gathering system is accessible to all employees, including those whose first language is not English.

"Just because they can't speak English doesn't mean they are dumb," Schroeder says. "Have things printed in both languages or have someone translate for them. That creates a sense of ownership that really does make a difference in how they look at the world."

Start small

Big, dramatic ideas get more than their share of attention. After all, they promise the biggest rewards. So managers are usually surprised

when Schroeder suggests they instead pursue small ideas aggressively.

"More than 90 percent of your ideas are the small ones," Schroeder says. "You want to focus on them because they are less disruptive and you can quickly implement them. Plus, you never know where they will lead."

As evidence, Schroeder offers eight reasons why small ideas are so important.

1. They build competitive advantage because they are typically too specific to be useful to the competition.

2. Employees focused on small ideas meticulously mind the details and provide better service.

3. They can often be useful throughout the business.

4. They can be steppingstones that lead to bigger ideas and opportunities.

5. When they appear in patterns, they can pinpoint bigger problems and opportunities.

6. By revealing gaps in knowledge or skills, they can identify important training needs.

7. They come up frequently, giving managers plenty of experience at managing and measuring them.

8. Individually they may not amount to much, but taken together they amass into a big competitive advantage.

Clearly, small ideas are important. To get them it's critical to listen to your front-line employees who see the day-to-day operation and know what needs to change to improve the details that can make or break a golfer's day.

Employees at Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla., meet daily with superintendent John Szklinski. They frequently offer up ideas to streamline their jobs and make the course more effective.

"The staff members bring with them a lot of experience and value," Szklinski says. "There is not a week that goes by that we don't make a change, significant or small, to what we are doing because of their input."

Grow the program

Once you have a system for capturing small ideas, the next step is to get bigger, better and more ideas. Giving ideas must be every employee's job and getting ideas should be every manager's job. If you use a weekly meeting for idea gathering, require that every person come with at least one idea, no matter how small. Ask the staff to discuss and refine each idea. The group can decide which ideas should be implemented and decide who will be responsible for doing so.

This is a good system, Schroeder says, because it charges all employees with idea generation, makes it easy to submit ideas, generates instant discussion and feedback, allows for quick decision making, and makes implementation quick and easy.

Make the meetings even more effective by asking for ideas to resolve particular problems, such as turf maintenance or watering schedules. "Turn the idea system into a strategic weapon," Schroeder says.

"We don't want teamwork, we demand it," Tegtmeier says. At staff meetings he encourages employees to identify problems, from a leaky sprinkler head to signs of turf disease, and come up with solutions for fixing them. "We want their input 100 percent on everything. I put everything on their shoulders and give them an opportunity to come up with an idea.

Just Say No

When employees start throwing dozens or hundreds of ideas your way, there are bound to be a few duds in the lot. It can be a challenge to reject bad ideas without dissuading future contributions. "That's the true art of managing ideas," says Dean Shroeder, co-author of "Ideas Are Free: How the Idea Revolution is Liberating People and Transforming Organizations" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004).

If the idea was clearly not given in good faith, it's OK to brush off the employee with a simple "thanks, but no thanks." When the idea was genuine, however, use the rejection process as a learning experience.

"Bad ideas are great teaching moments," Schroeder says. "If you get a string of bad ideas, you may realize you need to have a training session. The more employees understand how the company works, the better they will do their jobs. Bad ideas give you opportunities to identify weaknesses in employee knowledge."

Tim O'Neill, certified superintendent at the Country Club of Darien (Conn.), sometimes allows his employees to pursue bad ideas. Making mistakes can be a learning experience. "In a lot of ways I think of a golf course as a big laboratory," O'Neill says. "I've made mistakes myself over the course of years. I've learned best from experiences. I'm all for empowering people to learn from mistakes."

When an employee suggests an idea that you simply can't implement for safety reasons, explain why. If the employee suggests a real problem but his or her solution won't work, work with the employee to brainstorm new ideas. Also, always talk to employees about bad ideas — they may just need to clarify or explain what they meant. As long as you accept a good share of ideas, employees won't be deterred by a few rejections.

— By Becky Mollenkamp

I always have ideas, but I'm not so big to think that my ideas are better."

Get supervisors excited about the program by making them responsible for getting ideas from their crews, experts says. Create healthy competition by posting in a public place how many ideas have come in from each team. Some facilities also track and assess idea generation in individual employee performance evaluations.

Recognizing results

When employees start offering ideas and solutions that work, they deserve recognition. Your impulse might be to dole out dollars, but Schroeder calls that "a big disaster."

A per-idea reward may encourage frivolous ideas. It also creates a tangible award for something of intangible value. Do you pay the same amount for a small idea as a big idea? Do you split the reward if a group of employees comes up with the idea?

"Most people, myself included, work because they have to earn a living," Szklinski says. "But they want other satisfaction beyond pay. I want to feel that I add value to this operation. If staff members see their ideas being implemented, there's a level of satisfaction for them beyond compensation."

Listening to employees, using their ideas and giving public recognition are the best rewards, Schroeder says.

The efforts in creating an employee think tank are far outweighed by the rewards. With an open mind (remember, you don't know it all) and a good system, your club will improve, your employees will be happier and your job will be easier.

"It's obvious to me that employees who are more involved feel like part of the team," says Tim O'Neill, certified superintendent at the Country Club of Darien (Conn.) and president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. "They are better employees for it. They are happier and feel like they are part of the team. That's why managers should let their staff participate in ideas." ∎

Becky Mollenkamp is a freelance writer from Des Moines, Iowa, and a frequent contributor to Golfdom.

Do's and Don'ts of Getting Employee Input:

DO
- Focus on small ideas
- Create a formal system
- Recognize ideas
- Follow through

DON'T
- Wait for monumental ideas
- Stick out a suggestion box
- Offer cash rewards
- Wait too long to implement

PLEDGE OF Allegia

As superintendents, we expect **loyalty** from those under us. But we must not expect it blindly

By Ron Furlong

When I recently turned 40, I chose to celebrate the momentous life event not as a negative but as a great positive. As an opportunity. An opportunity — no, make that a right— to begin imparting my vast arsenal of wisdom on to others. So, on a cold, windy day earlier this year I began thinking of which portion of my brain to pass on to others. There were so many choices ... so many deep caverns to explore and then release. I gave myself a headache, in fact. After a couple of aspirin and some deep breaths, I delved again into the subconscious. What did I need to say? What did I need to pass along?

I came up with one word. One simple, rather short word. But a nice word. The word is "loyalty." So here's my spin on it. Remember, you have to listen to me. I'm now an elder.

The Oxford English Dictionary says that loyalty "implies a faithfulness that is steadfast in the face of any temptation to renounce, desert or betray." Unswerving allegiance, if you will.

How about this? Picture a tree; perhaps a Norway maple, a beautiful specimen sitting in the rough just off the approach on your fifth hole. Do you have it pictured? Now, ask yourself this. Could one say that a plant is loyal to its seed? Is the trunk of a tree loyal to its roots? Are the branches loyal to the trunk? And are the leaves, in turn, loyal to the branches?

Good questions, no?

There are a few other words that one tends to think of when contemplating loyalty: values, virtues, morals and ethics.

Values, in general, are those conceptions that are generally accepted in a society as desirable and which offer guidance. Virtues are the ability to behave in accordance with individual values. Morals could be described as the sum of principles that define what is ethically right or wrong, good or bad. And ethics are the study of the rules and elements of conduct that determine human behavior.

So, how is loyalty tied in with these other terms, and what in the name of all that is good am I trying to say here?

Let me start with this: I've been thinking a lot recently of what loyalty is and what it means. It seems like all around us, especially in the business of golf course management, loyalty is disappearing. Ethics are blurred. Virtues are fading. The phrase "dog eat dog" is becoming more apropos.

Personally, I've always considered loyalty to be one of the most important virtues by which I live my life. I've always made it a point to be loyal to my superior. No one ever taught me this. It wasn't a class in school. It was a choice that I, at some point and certainly not consciously, made. Loyalty, however, does need to be reciprocated. Loyalty grows out of a more basic quality, which is mutual respect.

valuesvaluesvaluesvaluesva
ethicsethicsethicseithk
LOYALTYL
moralsmoralsmorals
nce uesvirtuesvirtuesvi
esvaluesvaluesval
icsethics

If someone respects and values you as you respect and value them, loyalty grows and is not a negative. It can be difficult to remain loyal when trust is broken.

Here's my quick story: Years ago while working at a golf course I became aware that the superintendent was going to be fired the next day. I should not have been told this. And the person who told me should not have been told this.

The only person who should have been told this was the superintendent when he got fired. The assistant was actually told by ownership that the superintendent would be fired and he would get the job. A horribly unethical situation for all involved. I also faced the prospect that the superintendent's firing, followed by the assistant's promotion, could very well lead to my promotion to the assistant position.

Where did my loyalty lie? With the assistant, who I liked very much and was probably going to make me the next assistant? Or with the superintendent, who I actually had a bit of a strained relationship with and who would probably never promote me?

Strangely enough, I never questioned it. My loyalty lied with the superintendent. Despite the strained relationship he had with the rest of the crew and myself, he had my respect, and I believe I had his.

And of course the complete and disgusting breach of ethics gave me no choice. I called the superintendent that night and told him what I knew. After a sleepless night the frantic superintendent came in the next day and sure enough was let go. Did my warning help him at all? Probably not. But I felt it my duty to tell him.

I've heard too often as of late stories of lost loyalty and ethics breached.

Perhaps keeping silent would have been the proper course of action. I don't know. But loyalty, virtues, values, morals and ethics all need to be considered. We cannot just turn a blind eye, even if it would strengthen our own position.

In the same respect, I don't feel that loyalty should be completely blind. Take the Marines, for instance. They regard the term of loyalty as: "A Marine displaying enthusiasm in carrying out an order of a senior, though he may privately disagree with it." Also, "The job has to be done. … Always faithful. …

You owe unswerving loyalty up and down the chain of command."

I don't think we want to go to these extremes. However, one must always remember for whom they work and what that means. I've heard too often as of late stories of lost loyalty and ethics breached. It might do us all some good to review the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's (GCSAA) Code Of Ethics from time to time. We should not only review the code, but also consider why it was created in the first place.

As superintendents, we expect loyalty from those under us. But we must not expect it blindly. Earn respect and trust. Earn loyalty.

The following are such strong words to consider from time to time — values, virtues, morals, ethics and loyalty. You should stop and consider them someday soon. And when you turn 40, you can spout off about them. It's your right.

Now, I must get back into that brain of mine and see what else I have to offer. It's awful roomy and spacious in here. I'm afraid I may have tapped the source. ■

Ron Furlong is the superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Bellingham, Wash., and a frequent contributor to Golfdom.