

# 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



**F**or 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.

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**"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



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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

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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 man-

agers 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."

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## 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 Schroeder, 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



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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

## 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



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.*

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