

Bottom-up management

Delegate responsibility for reviewing suggestions to a committee of employees.

Ask your employees what they want and need for the company, solicit their suggestions—and then listen.

by Ed Wandtke

■ Today, the skills you need to lead, manage and direct your company are becoming more complex. Many of you are discovering that, by allowing more people into the planning and directing process, company performance is improved.

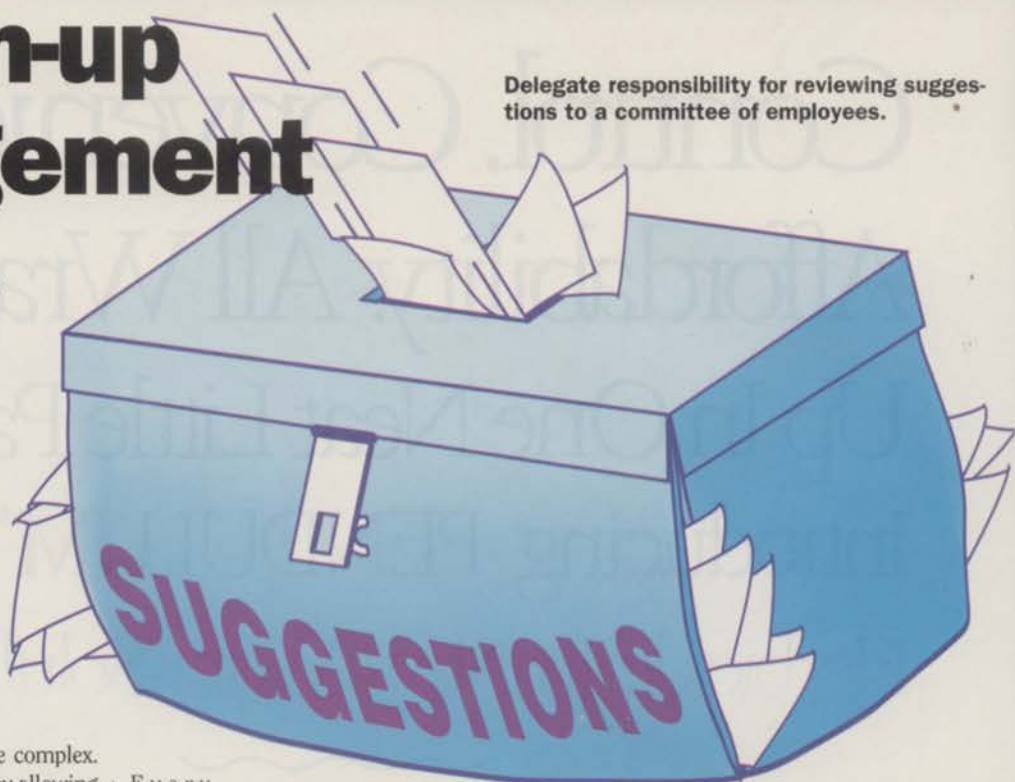
If, however, you have been your company's sole "brain trust," here are some ideas on how to involve your employees more in its operation.

Suggestion boxes—For years, companies have used suggestion boxes. But the concept doesn't work if you fail to react to the ideas suggested or to reward the contributors. As you embark on a new business year, now is the time to reactivate this informal system of receiving ideas from your employees.

One company has discovered that a great way to start the suggestion system is to delegate responsibility for reviewing employee suggestions to a committee. By using three employees instead of the owner to evaluate suggestions, the quality of the suggestions seems to be increasing. Posting the good suggestions and the rewards paid to individual workers (or to the entire staff) also serves to encourage participation in the suggestion system.

Participation in planning—Some companies frequently fail to take advantage of an excellent resource—their employees—when developing the company's future direction. Aggressive companies have found the following method of employee participation to be very helpful:

Every year, one or two days are set aside for all employees to go to an off-site retreat. Here, small groups focus on what the company is doing, how it is doing it, and things the company may consider doing differently.



Every employee is involved in evaluating the company. Realizing that there is no right or wrong answer to questions, employees often speak very openly.

If you have more than 25 full-time employees, I suggest you break the participants down into two equal-sized groups. Enabling all employees to speak and participate is necessary for this type of planning to be effective.

TQM—Setting up a system of Total Quality Management means that all employees need to play an active role in delivering quality service—no matter what portion of the industry you are in. So ask yourself the following questions:

- Do customers feel comfortable talking about the quality of your service with any employees they meet?
- Do employees have the option to make decisions on a job, based on customer concerns, without checking with you first?
- When messages are passed from customers through employees to you, are you certain that you are receiving each request?
- When employees join your company, do they learn the chain of command, your work rules and operating procedures before they are allowed in the field to perform services?
- Is each employee accountable for the work he or she performs?
- Are employees encouraged to make suggestions and to seek new business as they see opportunities?

If your response to any of these questions

is "no," your company is not taking advantage of one of its most valuable resources, your employees.

Refocusing—If employees lack a basic understanding of the company (what it is, what it does, who your targeted customers are, why you are in this business), they may often do things that don't help the company. Changing your information and communication system, along with establishing accountable work groups, is one method to improve a company's performance.

To be successful in the future, you will need to adapt to changing management systems and operating systems. You will need to become a leader with a vision, which then needs to be shared with employees.

Having all your employees know where the company is headed and how they can participate is critical. This will lead to a more harmonious workforce and faster achievement of company and individual goals. When employees have had a hand in setting company goals, the companies consistently achieve a better performance than the owner might have planned.

Don't underestimate the performance capabilities of your employees. They often want to reach higher goals, faster than you might expect. Bring employees into your planning process and the results will be rewarding to both the employees and to you.

—Ed Wandtke is owner of Wandtke & Associates, Columbus, Ohio. For more information on Wandtke's business consulting services, phone (800) 966-3546.