



Ideas & Inspirations

A Publication Provided as a Free Service of the Employee Involvement Association

May 1, 2009

Employee Involvement Association

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Idea of the Year Award Entry Deadline EXTENDED to May 6! Click here for entry forms.



"The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas."

- Linus Pauling

Lots of Ideas Is The Goal



You don't get to be one of the greatest chemists of the 20th century by having just a few ideas. As Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling states in the quote above, "The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas."

So how do you generate a lot of ideas? Circumstances surrounding that "how to" question can greatly affect how many - if any - ideas will be suggested. The most creative and clever people will keep ideas to themselves if they feel the organization is not one that treats their ideas as it should.

The key to receiving lots of ideas is to remove the barriers that are keeping them from getting to you. Some of these barriers include:

- **Corporate culture** - Are you truly encouraging ideas and showing support from the top down?
- **Training** - Have employees, supervisors and evaluators been given all they need?
- **Complicated processes**
- **Slow response times**
- **Communication**
- **Eligibility discrepancies** - Read on for an example of how the North Carolina Office of State Personnel addressed this particular barrier



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Case In Point



At the 2007 EIA conference, NCThinks Coordinator Sherry Joyner focused intently as one of the presenters shared a list of 10 barriers that hinder the success of any suggestion program. “With every barrier he discussed, I saw opportunities to improve our program,” Joyner said.

Armed with a conference’ worth of ideas and improvement tools, Joyner returned to her office in North Carolina intent on making the State Employee Incentive Bonus Program - now called NCThinks* - **much** better. It would be a 15-month journey involving coordinators and personnel from dozens of agencies, community colleges and universities, web development and design members, IT staff, a State Review Committee, and eventually the Governor.

But as all journeys do, it began with a first step, which was for Joyner and her team to dissect the barriers within their system.

“Because we’re part of the state government, much of what we do is mandated by state law. We began focusing on what was within our power to change rather than things that would require legislative action by the General Assembly,” Joyner said.



From there, Joyner condensed the issues into five priorities:

1. **Tie the suggestion system to the mission.** The suggestion program gives employees both an opportunity and an incentive for seeking better ways to conduct state government services. The purpose is to provide organizational solutions through employee involvement by recognizing ideas for increasing efficiency, reducing waste or saving tax dollars that are linked to organizational strategic objectives.

Joyner said, “We learned the importance of developing a strategic suggestion system, one that links suggestions to specific agency goals and objectives. This gives managers a tool for solving specific organizational challenges; it focuses employee creativity; and it produces a higher percentage of feasible suggestions. Since each agency has its own unique challenges, each can solicit suggestions to meet their greatest need.”



2. **Use a top-down approach.** For NCThinks, that means support, encouragement and recognition from leaders all the way up to the Governor. Leaders and coordinators across the state understand their roles and communicate the vision. “Before,” Joyner explains, “employees would have to push their ideas up. Now that the message is given from the top down, it encourages more participation.”

* the catchy moniker **NCThinks** is used for what technically is still titled the State Employee Incentive Bonus Program.

continued on next page



Case In Point - Continued




3. **Make a user-friendly online suggestion system** and database with email notification and suggestion tracking. This has simplified the process immensely and improved tracking and feedback. With the new online submission system, employees receive an automated email notification shortly after submitting a suggestion that confirms that the suggestion has been received. In addition, employees receive further email notifications as their suggestion passes through evaluation and other stages within the process.
4. **Provide more plentiful, informative resources.** This included everything from forms, letters and checklists to promotional materials, certificates and an administrator handbook. **See page 4 for an example of one of the auto-generated letters.**
5. **Clarify job description eligibility.** For a suggestion to be eligible in NCThinks, it must reach beyond the scope of the employee's regular job responsibilities. Joyner explains that stating this rule is one thing, but measuring it was much more difficult. Before attending the EIA conference, the issue of defining job description eligibility was an unresolved challenge. At the EIA conference, Joyner learned that the key to solving this barrier was looking at the scope of the idea. Now three pre-eligibility screening questions enable employees to gauge if they are submitting an eligible suggestion.

A suggestion is considered eligible if it meets all three of these pre-screening statements:

1. *I am not expected to develop a solution to this problem*
2. *I would not be held accountable if I did not perform this task*
3. *I need approval from my supervisor to implement this task*

By addressing the eligibility question in this manner, Joyner says it clears up ambiguities early and protects against what could become bad feelings later on. This in turn keeps the employee in a contributing frame of mind.

The new face of NCThinks was launched in January of this year, and Joyner reports that the website has enjoyed an increased number of hits with each new month, just as you would want in this type of results-driven culture. The streamlined suggestion process seems to be fulfilling the vision, one idea at a time, in an employee-friendly way with customer service at the forefront. It's win-win, as North Carolina realizes significant savings, increased employee engagement and productivity, and safety improvements.



"I want to thank you for the valuable information I gathered at the past two conferences. Since joining EIA two years ago, our program here in North Carolina has made notable improvements..."

Sherry Joyner
HR Partner/NCThinks State
Coordinator

We encourage you to visit
www.ncthinks.nc.gov

If you find an idea you decide to incorporate into your program, please let us know.



NCThinks Auto-generated Letter

Letter from Agency Coordinator – for coordinator to print, sign and mail to suggester

[Date]

[Mr. / Mrs. Last name]

[Mailing address]

[City, State Zip]

Dear XXX: [Suggester's name pulled automatically from suggestion form]

Thank you for submitting a suggestion to NCThinks. I am your NCThinks coordinator. As your coordinator, it is my job to make sure your suggestion is processed in a timely fashion. It is also a priority of mine to communicate to you what is happening with your suggestion as it moves through the process.

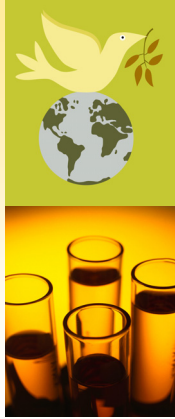
Here is how the process works. Initially, I will review your suggestion for completeness and eligibility. Next, a subject-matter expert will evaluate your suggestion for feasibility. Your agency will review the evaluator's feasibility report and determine whether to give the suggestion a "test run." This is the longest leg of the journey. For feasible suggestions, the trial implementation lasts twelve months. Finally, if the test run is successful, your agency will recommend your suggestion for an award.

To keep you informed of the status of your suggestion, you will receive automated feedback notifications from Notification@NCThinks. Do not reply to these messages. Replies will not be received. Please contact me directly with any questions you may have.

For more information, please go to our website: www.ncthinks.nc.gov

I look forward to working with you!

Best regards,



This month's quote

"The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas "

is from Linus Carl Pauling (1901 – 1994), who was among the first scientists to work in the fields of quantum chemistry, molecular biology and orthomolecular medicine. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry (1954) and the Nobel Peace Prize (1962), making him one of only four individuals to have won multiple Nobel Prizes and the only one to win two in unrelated fields.

Could The 5-Minute Rule Help You?

Do you know - and employ - the 5-minute rule? It's a very simple method to protect against having an idea shot down instantaneously. Not only will it save some good ideas, it will protect the feelings of the suggester and keep that person from becoming discouraged.



Hopefully your organization's culture is one that strives to encourage and nurture ideas rather than kill them. Under the 5-minute rule, anyone can put forth an idea. ***Then for the first five minutes after the idea is expressed only positive comments can be made.***

You might be amazed at how big a difference this little rule can make. For many, their first response to an idea is to go into a mental why-it-won't-work mode instead of looking for ways to make the idea a success.

Often, after 5 minutes (or less) of positive input, the discussion has evolved into a spirited brainstorming session that cultivates truly great ideas and solutions. And the added bonus that follows is that the suggestor will continue to contribute ideas. On the flip side, if an employee has a great idea that is quickly squashed or ridiculed, that employee very likely will stop sharing their thoughts.

***** We must share with you this 15-second tidbit: In computer science, the 5-minute rule is a rule of thumb for deciding whether a data item should be kept in memory or stored on a disk. It was first formulated by Jim Gray and G. F. Putzolu in 1987. *****

OK, back to ideas... Here's a quote we love: *"But how shall I get ideas? Keep your wits open! Observe! Observe! Study! Study! But above all, Think! Think! And when a noble image is indelibly impressed upon the mind -- **Act!**"*

It's from the American writer Orison Swett Marden (1850 - 1924), who also held a degree in medicine. Marden's first book, *Pushing to the Front*, was published in 1894. In 1897 he founded *Success Magazine*.

