

Why Don't People Participate More?

Most people aren't the least bit shy about saying what they think about politics, sports and their neighbours, even though they may know less about these things than they know about their job. ESOP companies often find that people are reluctant to participate in sharing ideas and information about how their job is performed – a key to process to business improvement. It is worth exploring some of the possible reasons for this.

Lack of Confidence

Most employees have rarely, if ever, been asked what they think. Now that they are, many are afraid to express their ideas. While people may think they have something important to share, they may not feel confident in their ability to express it. Rather than appear foolish, they say nothing at all. Lots of encouragement can help overcome this. Better yet, structure opportunities where everyone feels free to say something, but no-one is criticised, such as brainstorming sessions.

Lack of Conviction

Employees may think they *may* have a useful idea, but they are not sure. Even if they feel confident in their ability to express themselves, and even if they are not worried about looking foolish, they may still keep it to themselves because they don't want to burden people with something that may not prove productive. Many of the best ideas are lost this way because the initial thought may have initiated a whole new series of ideas. One of the goals of participation is to get these creative conversations going.

No Feedback

The number one complaint heard from employees about why they don't participate more is they don't get any feedback. They submit an idea or point out a problem and never hear about it again. One or two experiences like this can turn off the flow of ideas for a long time. Specific requirements for feedback have to be part of any participation program. Preferably, these should be in writing, with detailed explanations. Employees can be part of this feedback process.

Too Much Negative Feedback

The answer can't always be no, although this is a tricky issue. Obviously, managers don't want to approve bad ideas. On the other hand, some ideas are probably neither clearly good nor bad. It may make sense to spend some resources on uncertain ideas. Very often, when these ideas are reviewed further, they can change shape and become something useful.

Nothing Will Happen

Even if employees feel sure of themselves and get helpful feedback, they may still not want to participate much if they do not see results. In some cases, ideas may bring about changes, but no-one knows about them. More often, good ideas languish in the "in" boxes of people with other priorities. It is important to set up a process that clearly communicates when action will be taken and what the results of the action eventually are. This encourages everyone's involvement.

Ambiguity

Even if these problems are solved, employees still may be deterred by ambiguity. When

do you speak up? Can you take time away from your job to speak to someone? Where do you have this conversation? Should you talk to a supervisor or handle the matter with other employees? How much time is reasonable to spend on the issue?

Credit

Having jumped all these hurdles, employees may still become disillusioned if they find someone else takes the credit for (or no-one gets credit for) an idea that is implemented. Recognition is important. It is a low cost, but priceless, investment in ESOP companies.

What To Do

Companies cannot surmount these barriers by just *allowing* employees to participate. They must set up structures that provide an environment conducive to generating ideas that then get prompt, thoughtful feedback and appropriate implementation and recognition.

For further useful information on participation issues in ESOPs, see the NCEO web-site at: http://www.nceo.org/culture/culture_articles.html

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