

## **Here are top ways managers can encourage employees to take initiative and make a difference at work:**

Think how things could be improved. It's the person who does a job who knows best how it can be done better. Encourage employees to ask silly questions such as, "Why do we do it this way?" For example, a secretary at Johnsonville foods asked why the company didn't sell directly to customers and soon was put in charge of what became a multi-million dollar direct-sales division.

2. Think like a customer. Have employees look at the business from the customers' perspective, asking what would make it easier to do business with your company. An employee at Kasey's Fine Furniture in Denver suggested changing the store's operating hours to times that were more convenient for working customers, and sales instantly rose 15 percent.

3. Track your own performance. Encourage employees to track activity in their own jobs to build a case for improvements that could be made. An assembler for United Electric Controls tracked his numbers and was able to devise a simpler way to inventory parts that saved the company much money.

4. Take action on your ideas. Having ideas is good, but let employees know they can't just plop them on the table and expect others to run with them. They need to be an advocate for their ideas. An employee at Starbuck's pushed a frosty new coffee drink she believed in and with time the Frappuccino became a \$100 million product for the company.

5. Do your homework. Show employees how to think through their ideas, what steps need to be taken, what the costs and benefits are, and how to collect supporting data. A part-time employee of the State of Massachusetts independently researched the state's Medicaid rules on her own time and was able to uncover an accounting glitch that enabled the state to obtain higher reimbursements. She received a cash award and special thanks from the governor.

6. Build consensus. Suggest employees start with those who will most likely be interested in their idea to get them involved in supporting it. In the early days of the internet, an IBM employee sent an internal memo out to employees urging them to "get connected," along with action items they could take. He immediately got support for his initiative from others around the vision he saw for the future. He later was named Chief Technology Officer.

7. Speak up at meetings. We've all been in meetings that have gotten sidetracked or bogged down. Encourage others to play an active role in meetings, for example being the person who speaks up to say, "It may just be me, but have we covered this ground before? Perhaps we should summarize the choices and take a group vote for how we want to proceed." Others in the group will appreciate your intervention and you will help move the group closer to its goals.

8. Volunteer for new assignments. Whether it is a pressing problem, a special task force, or someone else in the department that needs help, encourage employees to be the person to step forward to help out. A new employee at The Gap in Toronto who noticed the company's policy manual didn't cover half the issues that came up in the store drafted a concise training manual that is now used throughout the country.

9. Manage your manager. Explain to employees how they need to understand their manager's priorities and fit their ideas into those. Encourage them to tell you what they need to do the best job possible. An employee at CP Corporation in San Jose told her manager she wanted to meet once a month to review her work and get feedback about her progress. These short meetings kept her manager informed of her needs and successes—and re-energized her.

10. Stick with your ideas; persevere. It's infrequent that ideas are met with open arms. Encourage employees to stay the course with those ideas they most believe in that will help the business. When management nixed one employee's idea for a flextime work schedule, she simply waited until a new manager came on board to propose the idea again, which was then accepted.