Why take all the responsibility for creative thinking when you could be tapping into the genius of your staff and boosting their motivation at the same time? Glynn Davis examines how to unlock the creativity in your employees.

Open to ideas

Most people have probably experienced the situation of sitting down to a meal in a restaurant only to find their table is on a surface so uneven that it rocks excitedly and spills their drinks.

The tried-and-trusted solution to this problem is to fold up a napkin or a beer mat and stuff it under the offending leg. This used to be the case at Malmaison and Hotel du Vin hotels until a member of the restaurant staff devised a small wooden wedge that quickly and easily alleviated the problem for affected diners without them having to resort to origami.

This is an example of how an employee - regardless of their status within a business - can contribute a good idea which, when implemented, can have a positive impact on the running of the organisation. This could be through it enabling the better delivery of service for customers, helping the business to save money, or allowing the staff to do their job more effectively and efficiently.

Sean Wheeler, director of people at Malmaison and Hotel du Vin, says: "Having lots of wooden and tiled floors meant we had lots of wobbly tables, but then a member of the restaurant team made a wedge at home, and we used this as a prototype for getting a lot of them made up. We now have a number of them in each hotel. It's this sort of thing that makes a difference to our guests."

It is obvious that such ideas can help innovation and that this can be the difference between a business's success or failure, but the issue for many companies is how exactly they go about unlocking this creativity from within their team.

FORUM FOR IDEAS

At Malmaison and Hotel du Vin, Wheeler says, "a number of systems and processes have been put in place. For starters, each hotel has a Your Voice committee - chaired by a senior manager - that meets once a month and comprises a delegate from each department. As well as being used to air views it also provides a forum for ideas."

To encourage input from all areas of the organisation the delegates are from a variety of levels. According to Wheeler: "People put themselves forward, and whoever has been voted in by each department is the spokesperson. This helps [communications], because a housekeeper or junior member of staff might not like to speak to senior people."

In addition, the company also encourages ideas and feedback from its staff early into their employment through "coffee chats". And each employee also has a formal review each year - called a "talent toolbox" - which includes an ideas and innovations section along with a blue-sky thinking component.

Along with the wooden wedges idea, Wheeler says other winning suggestions have included a solution to the problem of lots of products being stolen from the minibars. It involved removing the stock and, instead, installing a "shop" behind reception that stocked a range of minibar items that guests could order from their rooms. "We still add service, because orders can be phoned down, and we now provide an enhanced product range to include things such as muffins," he says.

Although you can clearly put in place formal mechanisms to generate ideas, Lawrence Alexander, chief executive of EasyHotel, believes you have to enact them informally: "You have to do it in a natural way. In the work environment, people have their work hat on, and since you have to try to get through to them individually [for their ideas], you might have to get their work clothes off."

CREATING A CULTURE

He suggests that there should not be a whiteboard in sight, as it puts people under pressure and snuffs out any creativity. For Simon Hargraves, commercial director at Pret a Manger, it is also about creating a culture where all members of staff feel sufficiently confident to come forward with their thoughts and innovative ideas.

"At Pret, it all comes back to culture. We just try to keep things simple. We fight [against things getting complicated] all the time. We are very informal and have a flat management structure, so all staff have access to senior management. Co-founder Julian Metcalfe is in [the office] full-time, and staff - as well as customers - can get through to him, so our employees feel empowered," explains Hargraves.

Part of this is the "Dear Julian" e-mail that Hargraves
INFOZONE INNOVATION

Juliette Joffe, co-founder of Giraffe, says seven ideas emerged from various feedback mechanisms, including employee suggestions, ideas from外部 sources, and feedback from customers.

1. **Always provide accessibility to senior management and promote this direct access.**
   - Staff members are encouraged to share their ideas directly with management.

2. **Provide an ideas box that enables anonymous ideas and comments to be posted.**
   - This allows staff members to submit their ideas without fear of retribution.

3. **Introduce relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) so that everybody's job includes spotting good ideas.**
   - KPIs are introduced to ensure that employees are actively looking for opportunities to improve.

4. **When holding one-to-one appraisals, place the onus on staff to contribute ideas.**
   - Staff members are encouraged to share their ideas during appraisals.

5. **Set aside time for brainstorming sessions and provide incentives such as free food and drink.**
   - Regular brainstorming sessions are held, and incentives are provided to encourage participation.

6. **Provide incentives, such as prizes for the best ideas.**
   - Incentives are offered to reward the best ideas generated.

7. **Create a culture that helps generate ideas, and embed KPIs within this so that ideas are likely to be brought up at appraisal time.**
   - The culture is designed to encourage idea generation, and KPIs are integrated to keep the momentum going.

8. **Initiate job switches with other operations to help generate ideas from outside the business.**
   - Employees are encouraged to work in different departments to foster creativity.

9. **Initiate job switches across departments, as this brings a new set of eyes to the problem, which could generate ideas.**
   - Staff members are rotated across departments to bring fresh perspectives.

10. **In large companies, break staff meetings down into smaller groups to avoid intimidating people, and mix the groups up across departments to create a more fertile environment for idea generation.**
    - Meetings are segmented into smaller groups to make them more manageable and less intimidating.

Sources: Lesley Reynolds, chief executive, Portfolio; and Liz Hartstone, managing director, London office, Profile Recruitment

---

Juliette Joffe

"[The questionnaire] is the first thing that we have done on a mass scale, and the response was terrific. We got lots of feedback"