

Get Your Mind Around a Brainstorming Session

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Most cooperative managers are open to suggestions from employees at any time. For that reason they have not developed any formal efforts to harvest employee suggestions. Last week I discussed the idea of periodically asking for written or oral suggestions on a specific topic. That's a great way to get ideas on specific opportunities or problem areas. Another vehicle to both improve the cooperative and enhance employee morale is to hold a brainstorming session.

In a consumer product or technology firm the purpose of a brainstorming session may be to visualize on the next breakthrough product or technology. In an agricultural cooperative a brainstorming session is more likely to focus on eliminating the bottleneck at the scale than on inventing the next post-it-note. We can still benefit from some of the brainstorming tips from the corporate world. Brainstorming sessions can be done in each department to build teamwork. Departmental sessions are a great vehicle to prioritize simple improvements in each area. Brainstorming sessions can also be a great vehicle to address issues that overarch departments or locations. Here a few tips for brainstorming with the entire employee group.

First, set the stage by focusing on the customer perspective rather than the internal operations. Internal operations may need to be tweaked to address a problem, but it's better to think of your procedures as part of a solution rather than the problem. Second, place some parameters on the type of ideas that would be most useful. Employees need to know whether you are looking for ideas to feed into your long run facility plan or for low cost solutions that can be immediately implemented. Finally, try to avoid over critiquing any ideas generated. A clarifying question can be useful but over scrutinizing suggestions is a sure way to kill the creative atmosphere.

Another great time for a brainstorming session is when you are upgrading facilities or technologies. I'll give some thoughts on that opportunity in my next newsletter.