

Guidelines for Employee Suggestions

Phil Kenkel

Bill Fitzwater Cooperative Chair

Cooperative employees can be a good source of ideas. At the same time an employee suggestion program can end up being just a channel for employees to vent frustration or to generate wild ideas that the cooperative could not possibly implement. The solution is to put a little structure, but not too much structure, into the format for suggestions.

The suggestion form (paper or electronic) should begin by asking for a one sentence description of the problem or the procedure currently in place. Next should be a similarly short description of the proposed solution. The third section, and one that is often left out, is a short section describing why the change would add value to the cooperative and what it would take to implement it. Don't ask for a full blown action plan but you should elicit some details as to the "why and how" of the suggestion. It's easy to simply dash off an idea, but in order to be useful you need to ensure that the employee(s) have thought through the suggestion.

That leads to the question of anonymous employee suggestions. There is a place for anonymous suggestions. For example, an employee might want to highlight the fact that a safety procedure is commonly being ignored. As a manager you wouldn't want any impediments to discovering that sort of information. However, in general, you want to encourage employees to stand behind their ideas. You also want to build an organization culture where feedback and innovations are valued. From a practical standpoint it is difficult to provide feedback to anonymous suggestions and impossible to provide any recognition or reward. The "name" section should ask for a list of all of the employees who helped develop the suggestion. Team suggestions are typically better defined and more thoroughly thought through so you want to subtly encourage employees to run their ideas past one or more of their peers.

Next week I'll discuss feedback and recognition for suggestions.