

Employee forum – making the most of ideas

The idea of ‘employee forum’ is much more than a requirement to keep people up dated on business changes. Forget the formal title and think of the opportunity to discuss issues and concerns with informed and interested people and you begin to see the relevance.

Front line employees know so much about the business and the customer that not talking to them at regular intervals is a serious business omission. Each day, someone will have a great idea about how to deliver a better service and if managers and leaders are not listening, everyone loses out.

Leadership attitude

As a leader or manager in the business you need to believe in the value your employees can bring. They are committed to the success of the business too – after all, their livelihoods depend on it, so begin now to treat them as responsible adults.

There is a dual role to the concept of forum – to hand on information that concerns employees so they know what is happening and what to expect in the future. It is also important to pick their brains on new ideas. Loads of ideas can look good when sitting in the corner office. Try them out in the middle of a busy call centre and the view may be totally different. Employees are the ones who can help define which ideas are positive and which need to be put in the bin.

Employee attitude

As an employees involved in forum discussion, you have to think through your role and how you want to play it. The approach you take will determine how seriously you are taken. Generally big picture thinking won’t be your job and unless you are really keen on it, it’s unlikely you’ll do it automatically. So when you put forward ideas, take a moment to think about the impact it would have on the rest of the business – will it help everyone or just be an additional burden or problem.

David had a friend in a big city business who was given an interest free loan for his travel card each year. David thought this was a great idea and decided to suggest to his company – after all buying an annual ticket would save money. True enough – that would be a real perk. But he forgot to think of it from the business perspective. A reasonable expectation from a big bank, it would be a killer move in the small business he worked in.

Nurturing the relationship

For this sharing of information and ideas to work well there has to be a respectful and trusting relationship. When an employee puts forward an idea that shows an apparent lack of concern for the business it will reduce credibility. And managers who fail to listen and make quick judgements will soon face sullen faces and resentment.

For managers the task is to listen with respect and help the development of understanding. David truly believed he had a good idea. He was not out to do the company - he just hadn't thought it through. The ideal response is to help him understand the implications for the wider business - support a rigorous conversation about the pro's and con's once and the person learns how to think differently in the future.

Employees learn a lot from the experience of putting their own situation into the business context. But don't just roll over. Many great ideas have come from front line employees. So engage in the debate with an open mind, challenge thinking - yours and others - and you'll soon have a win on your hands.