Promoting Creative Thinking in the Workplace

How do you create an innovative work environment and tap into your employee's creativity? The answer is to establish an atmosphere where employees will want to share their ideas with you.

Listen to all ideas presented. Don't make judgments until you've heard the entire concept. Convey interest by asking the employee to describe in detail what he or she has in mind. Offer a response that shows you understand the idea and appreciate it.

Never criticize or otherwise "put down" an employee who shares ideas with you. If you must offer a challenge, focus on the facts about why the idea is not workable. Employees can accept being turned down if the rejection is done with sensitivity and explanations are provided as to why the idea cannot be implemented. Should you find it necessary to offer criticism, always do so in private.

Don't use budgets as a constant excuse. An organization cannot call for new ideas and innovation on one hand and on the other hand plead budgetary constraints. If you know an idea will be expensive, work with the employee to come up with the possibility of a less expensive approach.

Offer help and support. Maybe equipment or more information is needed. Perhaps other departments, customers or suppliers must be consulted. Workers rarely have the time to do all the groundwork. If some ideas need added input, offer to get it. Also, provide other resources. You might have to invest in a prototype or trial run and then monitor progress to see how it's working out.

Don't insist that all ideas be put in writing. If you do, some employees will be shut down before they even get started. Why? Some very creative employees simply can't express themselves well in writing. Yet, their ideas are excellent. If you have such an employee and an idea needs to be written up, offer to arrange for the idea to be put in writing. Then, give the employee a chance to offer a final review for accuracy and approval of the document.

Never take undeserved credit. That's another way to stop the flow of creativity and innovation. If you play a supporting role in putting a successful idea into action, let the employee have the credit. Usually management knows which supervisors foster a climate for innovation without needing you to be in the direct limelight.

Recognize your innovative employees. If you have the authority, give them public recognition, added compensation and more responsibility. Recommend them for awards and share your own gratitude. A pat on the back works wonders. If you do it in public, the benefits are multiplied.