



expectations. It's the employees who are actually performing the jobs who are in the best position to know how best to do their jobs, to resolve problems as they arise, and to benefit the most from their actions. In fact, a recent poll of executives asked: "What do you feel is the single best way for employees to earn a promotion and/or raise?" Topping the list for 82 percent of respondents was, "Ask for more work and responsibility."

Too often, however, employees are reluctant to take the initiative they need to excel, in part because they do not feel that is what is really wanted by their managers. According to a Gallup survey of 1,200 U.S. workers, for example, 66% of respondents say their managers have asked them to get involved in decision-making, but only

Allowing Employees To Take Charge: INSPIRING INITIATIVE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

By Bob Nelson

Every employee is a wellspring of potential energy. The degree to which that energy is tapped in any given employee is a function of the interaction between the employee, his or her manager, and the working environment. An organization that expects, inspires, and encourages employees to perform at their highest levels will more than likely achieve those results. Energized employees take charge and do what needs to be done without being told. As Bill Hewlett, Co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, says, "Men and women want to do a good job, and if they are provided with the proper environment, they will do so." In short: give your employees what they need to do the best job they can with as much of their own initiative as possible, and your results and success—as well as theirs—will inevitably improve.

Give Employees The Chance To Take Initiative

One of the most significant activities that energizes employees is the freedom to take initiative. Taking initiative is a key ingredient in making improvements at work, solving problems, dealing with change, and providing customers with service that far exceeds their

14% feel they have been empowered to make those decisions; that is, they are not given the authority, resources, and support necessary to be successful.

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The Work Environment Should Promote Taking Initiative

Employee initiative is, in large part, a function of the work environment. Unfortunately, most organizations squelch employee initiative and creativity by stifling, discouraging, or even punishing employees for taking risks. However, the truth is that the more supportive and encouraging the environment, the more willing employees will be to take the initiative that organizations need them to in order to enable those companies to compete and excel. "How a company deals with mistakes suggests how well it will wring the best ideas and talents out of its people, and how effectively it will respond to change," says Bill Gates, Chairman and CEO of

Microsoft Corporation. “When employees know that mistakes won't lead to retribution, it creates an atmosphere in which people are willing to take chances in order to come up with ideas and suggest changes. This environment is important to a company's long-term success.”

How To Enable Your Employees

There are a variety of ways organizations can produce a work environment in which employees feel charged—almost compelled—to be creative. For example, at 3M (Minnesota, Mining & Manufacturing) in St. Paul, Minnesota, employees are encouraged to develop and implement new products. Staff members whose ideas are given the nod by management receive the freedom to build their own businesses within the company. We call this system “intrapreneuring.” Those who are successful in their efforts are given promotions and pay raises. There is no penalty for those who are not successful. Employees are motivated by the opportunity to see their ideas come to fruition, and a significant portion of the company's revenue now comes from products introduced through this program. 3M, you will recall, is the company that took a somewhat significant mistake by one of its inventors—a failed effort to make a super-strong adhesive—and turned the result, an adhesive that could be easily applied and then removed, into the sticky-note industry.

Urged on by the possibility of improving their employee compensation package, a group of workers at Going Places, Great Britain's second-largest travel agency, devised a unique performance-related pay scheme and successfully sold it to management. The aim was to provide a way out of the low-pay, low-status, low-performance trap that is widespread in the travel industry.

Now, maximum pay levels for “travel advisors” in shops will rise approximately \$14,000 to \$28,000, says Tony Bennett, the managing director. “While we anticipate a 15 to 20 percent yearly increase in the pay levels once the scheme is adopted, we are also delighted that this innovation by staff will actually pay for itself with a sales increase of an even greater magnitude,” he says.

It's one thing for a company to give permission for employees to become more involved in the way they do their jobs, but it's quite another for the newly liberated employees to put themselves to the test. When Pinnacle Brands, a manufacturer of sports trading cards in Grand Prairie, Texas, challenged its employees to manage themselves and to improve productivity in the process, undoubtedly some employees were wary about jumping into the fray. However, one secretary leapt at the opportunity. The woman, who was in charge of working with an outside firm that did trademark searches, determined that she could do the searches herself. By taking the initiative to suggest the idea and then put it into action, she saved Pinnacle \$100,000 a year.



A Little Recognition Goes a Long Way

Recognizing and rewarding employees for taking initiative not only acknowledges the employees' accomplishments, but also shows all employees that the organization values their ideas, ingenuity, and perseverance. To encourage his

employees to exercise initiative in their jobs and to take risks without fear of retribution, Richard Zimmerman, the chairman and CEO of Hershey Foods of Hershey, Pennsylvania, created a special award: The Exalted Order of the Extended Neck. According to Zimmerman, “We wanted to reward people who were willing to buck the system, practice a little entrepreneurship. . . people who were willing to take the heat for an idea they really believe in.” The award has been given out on numerous occasions, including to a maintenance worker who devised a way to perform midweek cleaning on a piece of machinery without losing running time.

At the Los Banos Enterprise newspaper in Los Banos, California, employees receive the P.O.T.S. (The “Pulling Out the Stops”) award for going above and beyond the

call of duty. Winners of the esteemed trophy—a flowerpot in which a bathroom plunger is planted—include a composing department employee who drove 40 minutes back from his home to fix a computer glitch holding up newspaper production, a bilingual sales representative who took the initiative to produce a Spanish-language section in the paper once a month (which has doubled in size every month), and two warehouse crew members who volunteered to stay six hours beyond quitting time when a printing press malfunctioned. The entire office received the P.O.T.S. award when, during a severe understaffing of the editorial department, every employee pitched in to write stories and take pictures, working late into the night until the paper was done. Says publisher Rhonda Lowe, “The exciting thing about this award is that people have won it for both small and large accomplishments.”



Helping Your Employees Help You

Any organization can unleash untapped innovation, creativity, and risk-taking in the workplace, simply by applying the following principles:

1. **Provide interesting and challenging work.** If employees are stuck doing the same tasks over and over again, they're going to find themselves in a rut. New challenges re-energize them and restore their enthusiasm. Having employees initiate changes and improvements in their jobs can get them excited about doing more.
2. **Have a clear purpose and well-defined goals.** All performance starts with clear goals. Everyone needs to know the organization's purpose, the team's goals, and how his or her work contributes to those goals. The process of

taking the time to discuss goals helps gain buy-in and commitment on the part of everyone included.

3. **Give employees responsibility for their actions.** Many companies are throwing out the volumes of policies and procedures that limit employees and are replacing them with simpler, less restrictive versions. Why? Because they realize that employees who are trusted to do what is right are more likely to take responsibility for their actions.
4. **Solicit employee suggestions.** When employees know that their ideas *are* taken seriously and that they can make a difference, their creative juices will flow more freely, and they will take the initiative to offer innovative and imaginative ideas that can affect any aspect of the business. Getting more and better ideas will be a function of taking the initial submission seriously and implementing those ideas as much as possible.
5. **Allow the freedom to fail and try again.** It is important that employees—and managers—look at mistakes as learning opportunities. When employees know that mistakes won't lead to retribution, but will instead serve as a basis for learning and further experimentation, they are more willing to take initiative to offer additional suggestions and further improvements.

Harold Poling, former Chairman and CEO of Ford Motor Company, says, “One of the stepping stones to a world-class operation is to tap into the creative and intellectual power of each and every employee.” Organizations need to demonstrate to their workers that all employees—not just managers—hold the keys to making a lasting and positive difference at work. By creating the right work environment and recognizing and rewarding employees for taking initiative, organizations will be well on their way to unleashing employee energy and creativity—and, in the process, gain a competitive edge that will help the organization, and all members of it, be more successful.

Bob Nelson is a fellow of the Workforce Stability Institute and President of Nelson Motivation, Inc. He is the author of the best-selling books, **1001 Ways to Reward Employees**, **1001 Ways to Energize Employees**, and the new **1001 Ways to Take Initiative at Work**, all published by Workman Publishing.