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The Power of Brainstorming and Problem Solving

By Jim Stewart

Jim Stewart is a regular contributor to North Country Business on topical business issues. Jim has now turned his attention to a series of articles on organizational effectiveness.

How company owners or managers execute the fundamental principles of management, make decisions by consensus, hold effective meetings, and listen ‘engagingly’, can all have a significant effect on organizational effectiveness.

Brainstorming, group problem solving and giving/receiving feedback are other fundamental actions that occur in all businesses, and how the dynamics of these actions are handled can have a very significant impact on anticipated outcomes. Following are some simple guidelines for each of these actions.

Brainstorming

Hold the Criticism

When ideas are criticized, a tendency to hesitate and evaluate an idea before stating it, starts to develop. As a result, few ideas are generated and many good ideas are lost.

The More Ideas, The Better

There is a direct relationship between the number of ideas generated and the number of ideas later judged as usable or good. Quantity leads to quality in the same sense that practice improves a skill.

The Wilder, the Better

Wild ideas indicate creative thinking. They are the result of approaching the problem or topic from a fresh perspective. This kind of uninhibited thinking leads to unique solutions.

Hitch-Hike

In addition to contributing ideas on their own, people should suggest how the ideas of others can be turned into better ideas, or how the two or more ideas can be joined into still another.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Focus Feedback on Behaviour Rather Than The Person

It is critical to refer to what a person does, rather than comment on what we imagine is being done. When we talk in subjective terms implying inherited, constant qualities, it is difficult, if not impossible to understand how to change behaviour.

Focus Feedback on Description Rather Than Judgment

The effort to describe represents a process for reporting what occurred. Judgment refers to an evaluation in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, nice or not nice and makes assumptions about motives.

Focus Feedback on the Sharing of Information Rather Than on Giving Advice

By sharing information the other person is left free to decide how to use the information provided.

Focus Feedback on the Exploration of Alternatives Rather Than on Imposing Your Own Solutions

When a variety of options or means are generated towards the attainment of a particular goal, premature acceptance of a particular answer or solution is less likely.

Group Problem Solving

1. State the Problem Clearly
Be sure enough information is available, so that the real problem is stated rather than merely a symptom of the problem.
2. Define the Essential Criteria a Solution Must Meet to be Satisfactory
List any other conditions to be fulfilled which would be desirable, if feasible.
3. Use Creative Ideas to Search for Solutions. List Them.
Try to use different frames of reference and perspectives to develop creative solutions.
4. Evaluate the Solutions to Determine the Extent to Which they Meet the Essential Criteria
Be certain there is enough information to know the solution will not produce unacceptable side effects.
5. Select the Solution Which Best Meets the Essential Criteria
6. Check the Solution Finally Selected Against the Problem as Stated
Be sure the solution really solves the problem.
7. Specify the Action Plan for Implementing the Solution
Who? What? How? When? Where?
8. Specify an Action Plan for Assessing How Well the Solution is Being Implemented
What information is required to make this assessment? Who will collect it? How? Who will make the assessment and report success achieved to the group?
9. Implement the Solution
10. Follow Through on the Assessment Steps

The bottom line...in effective organizations people feel they are on a winning team and they believe they're doing something important. They are proud of the organization they work for and they feel they're making a contribution to something that's important to them. Effective brainstorming, problem solving and employee feedback can help to make these desired outcomes become more of a reality.

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