



## Four Keys to Empowering Front-Line Employees

- 1) **Ask Them How.** Employees are the radio frequency for your customers – if you tune in they'll broadcast what you need to know. To do that, you need to create a conversation forum. You won't get the real data you need through a "survey" approach – it needs to be done via through face-to-face conversations.
  - All Hands meetings. Google uses Friday chats, led by the two CEO's who answer all questions, many of which were voted on by employees the prior week. Weekly is not too often, especially during a transition or change period.
  - Online forums can be effective if you're spread out geographically. It's important that it be interactive and led by a top leader, not HR or internal Communications department. Start a blog that reports the feedback your customers are giving and the steps people are taking to solve them. Allow open comments to collect ideas.
  - Maybe create a new spin on an old idea: The suggestion box becomes a button on your intranet – and it has an added function in which anyone can see all suggestions and what happened to them.Someone in a leadership role has to interact regularly with the "employee-customer conversation" to keep it alive. The key to making this work is that it's gloves-off, transparent, open, and employees see leaders making changes based on their input.
- 2) **Reward Them.** Crunch the numbers. If you give the front lines an 8%-10% raise, what is the productivity increase you need to offset it, and how will you measure it? Money isn't the only change you have to make, but if you *don't* pay equitably or above market, the remaining actions have to be even stronger.
  - More than just giving a small raise, make it clear you want more employee input and involvement in decisions regarding strategies and customers. (See #1, #3 and #4).
  - Find your "lead tribe." Find the smart, talented, ambitious people *who are not in management*, and are eager to contribute more. With some quality coaching from some of your best managers, they will make good things happen. When it does, visibly make a big deal of their ideas and input.
  - If you have no power to change compensation, consider a surplus budget to give "perks" like gift cards and time off.
- 3) **Show Them Progress.** Be clear what "winning" means in *measurable* terms. Keep it simple (no more than 2-3 measures).
  - Start a friendly "inside competition" - a little competition is proven to be motivating to people's performance, when it doesn't pit them against each other. In our book *Transforming Corporate Culture*, we offer a story of how Starbucks uses this concept.
  - Everyone must see the scoreboard frequently. This is basic to improving productivity.
  - Ask your front-line employees to help you improve the scorecard and participate in how they want to see progress – how often, what form, etc.
  - Whether you measure response times, on-time delivery, innovation, quality, or customer service, it must be something within their control and that they can see the daily or weekly scorecard changing. One caution: Be careful what you *really* measure – eg, call centers who reward time on call and don't solve customer problems are working against productivity.
- 4) **Teach Them Smart Risk-Taking.** Unless your company/department can all sit in the same room together, it's best to start small and cascade "empowerment" in stages.
  - Choose a core group of front-line employees and first-line managers who want to engage in supporting and helping transfer decision making more to the employee level.
  - Enlist them as "Engagement Champions" and charter an effort to let them teach you what employees want and need, while managers teach them what it means to take a small, calculated risk and learn from it quickly.
  - Use small teams as the core driving force of empowerment. Rarely does anyone have enough knowledge these days to implement ideas in our complex world by flying solo.

You don't need a consultant with a fancy spreadsheet to grow and innovate in your company: The best ideas usually do come from the employees themselves. Just ask them what people want, what drives them nuts, what they think is unfair, and what will motivate them to "give extra" and create "passionate spirit."

Asking for and implementing front-line employees ideas is priming the pump on growth and innovation: It *ensures* more good ideas and more energy pours forth *en masse*.