

Why Ideas Get Wasted at Work

By Shelley Dunstone

Some people find it hard to believe that anyone would be reluctant to put forward their ideas at work. After all, we're all grown-ups aren't we, and no one is going to bite your head off if you make a suggestion, right?

It's much more complex than that. In a recent study reported in Harvard Business Review ("Why Employees are Afraid to Speak", Detert and Edmondson, May 2007), half of the two hundred employees surveyed reported that they felt it was not safe to speak up or challenge traditional ways of doing things. Interestingly, they were not so reticent to talk about *problems*. They were *more* reluctant to put forward *creative ideas for improving products, processes or performance*.

What caused them to withhold their ideas? Their fear was not logical, but it was still real. The main problem was not so much that they'd had a bad experience when putting forward suggestions, although a few said that they had experienced hostile reactions from managers. It was more a vague sense of risk. They didn't know what would happen if they voiced their ideas. It just didn't *feel* safe. Some recounted stories of people who had said something publicly, and then "were suddenly gone from the company." Employees also made assumptions, even though there was no evidence to support them. For example, some assumed that their manager would resent suggestions that implied a need for change. Others said they didn't want to embarrass or "show up" their boss by speaking up in a group situation where more senior leaders or other subordinates were present.

So, how can leaders create a climate that reduces this sense of risk?

- Don't assume that people will put forward their ideas without prompting.
- Emphasise that continual improvement is important, and that you expect people to keep their eyes open and that suggesting ideas is part of their job.
- Ask interesting questions to encourage thinking and discussion.
- Ask others to identify areas for improvement; don't always be the one to set the agenda for discussion.
- Have both group and individual discussions with people, to give people an opportunity to raise something they may not feel comfortable discussing in a group.
- Encourage people to raise their ideas in front of others rather than behind their backs.
- If you implement a suggestion, commend the person who first suggested it; they will feel resentful if someone else gets the credit.

And finally, admit that you don't know all the answers, because no one does!