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Managing

How to coax ideas out of a sheepish staff

Your employees likely have a wealth of untapped ideas — many are just too embarrassed to speak up.

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In 2002, Algoma Steel was in a precarious position. The once mighty Ontario steel manufacturer had just emerged from bankruptcy protection for the second time in a decade, and badly needed to improve its operations to prevent another drastic restructuring. One measure the company took was to implement a far more efficient process for producing heat-treated steel plates, which resulted in another \$90 million in annual revenue. Former CEO Denis Turcotte later singled out this idea as a pivotal one in the life of the company — and it came from an employee who worked on the shop floor.

The wisdom of employees across an organization should not be underestimated, but innovative ideas sometimes fail to reach the top. According to a new study from the Kansas University School of Business, published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, part of the problem is that some employees are simply afraid of how they will be perceived if they suggest a change.

The authors surveyed more than 400 employees and supervisors across four industries about their attitudes toward innovation. Previous studies have largely ignored the social ramifications of contributing new ideas in a work environment, and presumed that employees will innovate when they believe such behaviour will help them in their own jobs. But the Kansas University study found the reality is more complicated, and that social concerns prevent some employees from even opening their mouths.

Feirong Yuan, one of the study's co-authors, says the effect is more likely to be prevalent in an organization that does not appear to value change. Even if workers are unsatisfied with the status quo, they will not necessarily suggest an idea for improvement for fear of appearing disruptive. A "mutually trusting and respectful" relationship with a supervisor didn't help much either. "You'd think how the supervisor thinks about you should be a really major factor," Yuan says, but employees are also worried about how they will be perceived by co-workers who are content with the status quo.

A company with employees too wrapped up in their own image to contribute new ideas could suffer in the long run. But Yuan says there are a couple of things managers can do to overcome the problem: infuse innovation into all aspects of the company, and write a requirement to suggest improvements into the job description of every employee. Creative thinking is simply expected in high-tech fields or industries such as advertising, but not so much in manufacturing or service sector positions, for example. It's up to management to break stereotypes about job roles.

In the case of Algoma, the company made a concerted effort to solicit ideas from employees at all levels. The direct benefit to employees was also clear — without new ideas, the company's future could be in peril. A company doesn't have to be teetering on the edge for employees to get motivated, of course. Rewards can make a big difference, says Cissy Pau of Clear HR Consulting in Vancouver, such as a small bonus to anyone whose idea is implemented. Some companies actually allow employees a percentage of the profits or cost-savings from an idea that management acts on, although she cautions the process can quickly become bogged down in costly bureaucracy.

Ultimately, encouraging employees to contribute has to start with a manager who is willing to listen. "I see it a lot where a manager really doesn't want feedback," she says. "If that's the reaction employees get, who is going to want to give suggestions?"