

# How to encourage ideas from your team at meetings

BY PEG KELLEY

You're at a meeting with key staff. You want some new ideas to address the topic.

Looking around at this group of creative, ambitious, bright people, you say, "Let's get some fresh ideas on this. Who's got something?"

Suddenly, you feel like the high-school teacher who has asked a question about the homework no one did. People find their notepads fascinating, others fumble in their briefcases muttering things no one can hear, still others stare into space seeming lost in thought. No one is looking at you.

What's going on?

There are many reasons for this unproductive response to your query. Some of the most common reasons are:

1. People are afraid of looking like idiots in front of bosses and peers;
2. They don't entirely understand the question or the topic itself;
3. They worry their ideas are not "fresh" enough or "new" enough for you and offering them will subject them to criticism (and might even show up on their performance review);
4. They've seen others who gave ideas be attacked and embarrassed and don't want to join that elite club;
5. They didn't realize this was to be an interactive experience and were simply waiting for the meeting to end and are now caught unprepared;
6. Caught off-guard, their minds are blank and they have no ideas.

If you could re-do the meeting from the start, you might send out an agenda and indicate on it or the cover note that you'd like people to bring ideas with them on topic #2. Thus, you'd give the group advance notice and they can mull over the task ahead of time.

Or at the start of the discussion, when you're explaining why this topic is important and how the company got to this point, you could warn the team that you'll be asking for ideas at the end of the information-sharing. Thus, they'll gear up their listening and be ready with some ideas when the time comes.

So, that's what you'll do next time. But now, here you are, trying to make eye contact with your team and wondering what's wrong with the hiring process that brings apparently inarticulate or slow-thinking workers to your company.

Creativity requires two important things: a safe climate and good thinking. People may have insightful and innovative ideas but if the perceived risk of offering them is high, those ideas will never see the light of day. Of course, the opposite is possible (although rare) — your company may be employing unimaginative workers. In the latter case, you have a recruiting problem. But that's the topic of a different article.

Why might employees perceive offering ideas to be risky? Look around your company. Are people rewarded who try new things? Are mistakes severely punished? When people make suggestions that seem patently impossible, are they met with groans or rolling eyes? In meetings, like the one you're in, do ideas get ignored, met with silence, discounted? Do status and rank games get played where the lower level people are not heard? Are ideas stolen and presented later as someone else's?

As the head of this meeting, you can manage the climate. Here are seven things you can do to encourage and elicit ideas:

1. Say something encouraging like, "Let's get a range of ideas up here on the flipchart. All ideas are good ideas and I'd like you all to hold off on negative comments or judgments. Later on, we'll select from the big list."
2. Give a brief summary of the topic (again, if necessary) not only to remind them of the situation but also to give them time to think.
3. Welcome each and every idea, even if it seems you've heard it many times before. Your behavior will be closely watched and how you treat ideas will invite more or shut them off.
4. Either you or someone else write up the

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ideas (on a flipchart if possible) in the words of the giver. This gives encouragement and assurance that their idea is valuable.

5. Notice if ideas are coming from only a few people. Some individuals find the hurly-burly of a fast-paced meeting to be uncomfortable. Consider having the group take a minute or two to write down some ideas. Then, first ask for people to talk who haven't yet had a chance. The quieter, more introspective people will appreciate this open invitation.

6. Rather than evaluate each idea as it is offered, add it to the list for later selection. You'll have a wide mix of ideas and can then choose among them for intriguing ones that could benefit from further development.

7. Be patient. It's rare that brilliant ideas emerge right away. In fact, many breakthroughs come from the combination of smaller ideas. Remember that people often give "safe" ideas first and only offer the more creative ones when they've gauged the climate to be open-minded.

Follow these steps and next time you won't get the "caught in the headlights" look. It's really simple, if you're willing to make the effort. Your staff will thank you for it.

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