



## WHAT BECAME OF YOUR SUGGESTION BOX?

Have you ever considered what the single most important factor underlying the success of American business might be? Is it our free enterprise system, superior management, or people with a willingness to work hard? I would argue that while all of these factors have contributed to our business success, none of them qualify as being singularly most important. In my opinion, *the success of American business is mostly dependent on the rapid acceptance of new ideas*, i.e., our unique ability to foster, accept, and apply those ideas, which evolve from the minds of men. After all, without the development and eventual use of new ideas, progress would be nonexistent.

Several years ago, I was traveling through the industrial districts, which surround Glasgow, Scotland. While visiting with the manager of a plant, which manufactures and assembles highway construction equipment, he spoke of his firm's difficulty maintaining its competitive position with the American manufacturers. There were many factors such as available financing, trade restrictions, corporate taxes, and logistics, which the manager claimed, were contributing to his firm's competitive disadvantage with the Americans. However, near the end of our discussion, the manager became more philosophical in his lamentations. Eventually he admitted that those factors mentioned as being competitive burdens on his firm were actually only the end products of a more basic dilemma. The manager finally

acknowledged that British industrialists had, long ago, lost the battle of the suggestion box. He explained that while manufacturers in his country had many ideas for improving their operations, there existed no system for soliciting those ideas, testing them, and implementing those, which appeared promising. On the other hand, the Americans had their suggestion boxes, which openly encouraged the submission of new ideas no matter how meager they may be. The American system, therefore, provided an opportunity for every firm employee to play a role in the operations and progress of that business.

### A New Idea

Obviously not all new ideas contribute to the success of a business. It has been said that out of every one hundred ideas generated in the minds of men, only one will ultimately be expressed as a suggestion. Perhaps only one out of every ten suggestions will be given serious consideration by management. Furthermore, not all of those suggestions considered will be tested, and only a small proportion of those tested will prove worthy of application. The odds, therefore, are about 100,000 to 1 that a mentally generated idea will ultimately prove useful. The relevant question, of course, is whether your firm can take the risk of missing out on that one idea. Probably not.

What became of your suggestion box? Have you ever used one? Does there exist in your firm a system that encourages the expression of new ideas? Unfortunately, it is relatively easy for a manager to squelch a new idea,

but much more difficult to solicit, consider, and test it. Some managers are totally unaware that they have become practicing “idea killers.” These managers believe that they remain open-minded about suggestions for improvement, but unbeknownst to them, their rejoinder to the expression of a new idea is almost totally negative. This discussion is designed to consider ten typical managerial reactions to such an expression. Moreover, the objective is to analyze these reactions and develop a means by which your firm’s suggestion box can be reopened.

### **Who Dreamed It Up?**

Consider for a moment how many times during the past year you have used the phrase, “Who ever dreamed up that idea?” It is highly probable that this phrase was used to express your reaction to the expression of a new idea. While the phrase contains no negative terms, its likely interpretation is negative. For example, this reaction is most often interpreted to mean, “Who (could be so dumb as to have) ever dreamed up that (ridiculous) idea?” Now the negative connotation becomes more obvious. Is there any doubt as to why the person on the receiving end of this expression feels somewhat rebuffed? Of course not, and the person submitting the suggestion is not likely to use the suggestion box again. Sure, he may continue to generate new ideas, but he may lack the courage to express them.

The next time you are confronted with a new idea try this phrase instead: “Thank you for your suggestion. Do you have more information as to how this idea might be useful?” This reaction contains no commitment on your part and encourages the person with the idea to devote more serious thought.

### **Is it Saleable?**

If your firm is in any way engaged in sales, probably the most common rejoinder to a new idea is, “It’s too hard to sell.” On what basis do you make such a hasty statement? How do you know it will be difficult to sell if you have never tried it? These will be the questions generated in the mind of the person making the suggestion. Again he will become discouraged and feel that management has made a too hasty conclusion.

Had your reaction been, “Thanks, we shall immediately determine its salability,” the person with the idea would be encouraged by the understanding that his suggestion was being taken seriously.

### **Considerate Avoidance**

How often have you used or heard the phrase, “I’ll appoint a committee to study it?” Again, this is not a negative statement when interpreted literally. However, submitting an idea to a committee for study may easily be interpreted to mean the matter will be placed under investigation for the next twenty years or so. As we all know, the committee system has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the latter is its inherent ability to postpone indefinitely or totally bury an issue before proper consideration is given. Suggesting that an idea be submitted to a committee may, at times, be described as considerate avoidance.

If an idea does warrant committee consideration, place some definite constraints on how it will be handled. Explain to the idea generator why it is being channeled to a committee, how and when it will be studied. Finally, offer some assurance that the results of the committee study will be communicated back to the idea originator. Remember, if the person

becomes discouraged with your reaction to his idea, he may withhold his next idea and it may be the one in 100,000 that you have been waiting for and have need of.

### **Resistance to Change**

New ideas often pertain to changes in operational procedures. The suggestion may be relevant to a change in your accounting procedures, your inventory and credit policy, or even something as mundane as the way in which your customers are greeted over the telephone. If a new idea does imply a change in a long established business procedure, one's reaction to it may be of the type, "That's not the way we did it in the past." This phrase is comparable to saying, "Who needs improvement?" Management often fails to realize that the status quo becomes second best immediately upon the development and availability of an improved procedure. This is not to say that new ideas continually should be adopted purely for the sake of change. What is being said, however, is that new ideas should not be perfunctorily tossed out solely on the basis that it would require a change in procedure.

Had your rejoinder been, "Thank you, your suggestion may result in some much-needed changes," the originator would understand that his idea is appreciated and that it will be given a fair hearing. At no time should the idea recipient imply that the status quo retains a competitive advantage over a suggested change.

### **Too Costly**

In the business world, there is probably no more effective way to kill new ideas than the use of the phrase, "It's going to cost money." Of course it will cost money! Good ideas cost money in the beginning. The development of the computer, jet engine, and nuclear power were all very costly endeavors. However, the savings,

which ultimately evolved from these new ideas far, surpassed the development costs and rendered alternative sources of computation, travel and energy (respectively) obsolete. Furthermore, ask yourself, "When did you ever earn a dollar without first investing a dollar?"

The merits of a new idea must not be judged on costs alone. Your reaction to the suggestion should imply that while costs are important, savings and eventual revenues will be given equal consideration.

### **We Tried It Once**

Another common management rejoinder is, "That's been tried before." If this typifies your reaction to a suggestion, you are dodging the issue. This dodge is often successful in that it suggests to the idea generator that he is incapable of developing a truly original idea. Even if management is not attempting to dodge the issue and the idea has, in fact, been tried before, the situation may have changed. What proved unsuccessful before may turn out to be a real bonanza under the new environment.

Your reaction should have been phrased, "This idea reminds me of something we tried before, but it may be worthy of a second look and another attempt." This does not kill the idea, but places it in the proper perspective. The person submitting the suggestion feels assured that his idea is not being dodged and that management is not relying solely on hindsight to render its judgment. Consider for a moment what might have happened to the men's fashion designer who, about a year ago, suggested to his employer that the firm might manufacture flashy, wide ties for men. Had management relied on the past trends and hindsight, the suggestion would have been ignored and the firm might have badly missed the market.

## **It's Too Complex**

"It's too complicated," is another management rejoinder, which may imply an attempt to avoid the issue. President J. F. Kennedy once suggested that the USA should have a man on the moon by 1970. Many people, including numerous scientists, discounted this suggestion on the basis that the feat would be much too complicated to achieve in such a short time. Those fearful of the complexity have now been shown to be erroneous. Mankind can attain miraculous achievements with determination, industriousness, and devotion to duty. But without new ideas, regardless of how complex they may be, mankind is unable to set the goals towards which his efforts can be directed.

If a new idea requires complex changes, be honest in your expression of this fact. However, do not allow complexity, alone, to detract from the value of the idea nor deter you from conducting a complete analysis of the idea's prospects. Once this is communicated to the person submitting the new idea, he will be satisfied that his contribution is being handled properly.

## **Who's Problem?**

Suggestions or new ideas need not necessarily be related to your line of business. For example, suppose you are the manager of a feed manufacturing plant and an employee approaches you with an idea for improving the durability of sprinkler irrigation systems. What would be your reaction to his idea? "It's not our problem," is a possible rejoinder. In expressing this reaction, management is also implying that they decline any interest in the profit, which might evolve from the sprinkler improvement. Having received management's reaction, the employee with the idea will either quietly withdraw or, worse yet, become disgruntled and take his

idea to one of your competing feed manufacturers who is more open-minded about diversifying his operations.

Instead of reacting negatively, management should recognize that while the new idea lies outside the present scope of operations, it may prove attractive enough to warrant further consideration as a diversified activity.

## **Complacency**

The ninth common managerial reaction to new ideas is characterized by the phrase, "We're doing all right without it." Perhaps the firm is doing well at the present time, but can management accurately predict the future? Will good times continue? Can your firm afford to remain static in a dynamic society? If management fails to openly express an interest in improvement, the future will likely become that firm's major adversary. To guard against the uncertainties of the future, management must remain on the lookout for all potential improvements. It is human nature to become more complacent during a period of favorable economic conditions. Complacency, however, is a very expensive luxury, which few businesses can afford.

Listen carefully to the new idea with which you are confronted and compliment the source of the idea by using the phrase, "We are always looking for helpful suggestions; yours will be given serious thought."

## **The Risk**

The acceptance of a new idea does involve a risk. This is an indisputable fact. But risk alone, should not be used by management as the scapegoat for the avoidance of promising suggestions. How often have you used the phrase, "It's never been tried before and is, therefore, too risky?" Consider for a moment how boring life, itself, would be if

risk and uncertainty were nonexistent. The above rejoinder is a logical reaction only if you lack the imagination for change or the courage to respond to a risk. I am not suggesting that unwarranted risks be taken in the ambitious pursuit of new ideas, but that some risk is inherent in all activities, which have never been tried before. Risk becomes one of many factors, which must be studied when management evaluates a new idea. Once management is aware of the risks involved, contingency plans can be formulated to guard against that rare catastrophe.

All business ventures involve some degree of risk. The acceptance of new ideas is no different. Management should express its willingness to try something new, given proper recognition of the risks involved.

## Summary

The rapid acceptance of new ideas has been, and continues to be of vital importance to the success of American businesses. Management cannot ignore the theory of the suggestion box. All too often managers unknowingly discourage the generation of new ideas within their firms. This discouragement often appears in the form of negative rejoinders to the expression of suggestions. This paper considers ten common managerial rejoinders and illustrates their various interpretations. Finally, the discussion suggests means by which the managerial reactions can be rephrased so as to encourage the development, study and acceptance of new ideas. Successful managers are as willing to listen as to talk.



Ken D. Duft  
Extension Marketing Economist