

EMPLOYEE SUGGESTION PROGRAMS

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

By: Michael W. Price
Deputy Chief
Dallas Fire Department
Dallas, Texas

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ABSTRACT

Suggestion systems and programs are based on the reasonable assumption that employees can contribute thoughts and ideas for the purposes of increasing the quality of the organization's operations and/or decreasing costs. The problem is that many tradition bound fire departments are reluctant to change and have no formal program to solicit and manage suggestions from within the organization. The purpose of the project is to review current literature and benchmark fire departments in the State of Texas to determine if an Employee Suggestion Program would enhance the process of receiving and implementing suggestions in the Dallas Fire Department.

The descriptive research method was used to answer the following questions:

1. What percentage of fire departments surveyed in the State of Texas have Employee Suggestion Programs and what percentage of the programs have had positive results?
2. What are the components of successful Employee Suggestion Programs in the private and public sector organizations, i.e., rules, structure, rewards, etc.?
3. What are examples of positive suggestions received from fire departments in the State of Texas that have been implemented?

The procedure included a survey instrument sent to fire departments in Texas, a review of current published articles on Employee Suggestion Programs and a search of the Internet. The results indicated that only 26% of fire departments surveyed in Texas have a suggestion program, however, 82% stated results were positive. Twelve (12) components were revealed as prime factors in developing a successful program from the literature review. The surveys indicated only a limited number of positive suggestions

were implemented in the fire departments surveyed. The recommendation is for the Dallas Fire Department to develop a suggestion program by receiving assistance from private contractors that provide this training or benchmark a successful program, and coordinate with the city's Strategic Plan and Balanced Scorecard program.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational change is not an easy process, especially in tradition bound fire departments with a centralized management structure and a top-down decision making process. Many people resist change because they are comfortable with the way things are. “If its not broken, don’t fix it,” or “That’s the way we have always done it,” is probably a reflection into many fire departments’ management philosophy. Change and finding more effective ways to conduct business may be discussed in the department; however, many officers will accept some change, but only if they themselves do not have to change very much. These attitudes may lie at the core of the problem of why an individual fire department may not have a successful Employee Suggestion Program.

Suggestion systems and programs are based upon the reasonable assumption that employees can contribute thoughts for the purposes of increasing the quality of the organization’s operations and/or decreasing costs. Essentially, a contract is set up between employees and the organization in which the employees are offered rewards for worthy ideas.

A problem in the Dallas Fire Department (DFD) is that chief officers are expected to develop suggestions related to improving organizational performance and safety related issues but no formal program exists to solicit and manage suggestions from within the organization. The rank and file members are not encouraged or rewarded for their efforts when submitting ideas for improvement. The purpose of this project is to review current literature and benchmark fire departments in the State of Texas to determine if an Employee Suggestion Program would enhance the process of receiving and implementing suggestions in the DFD.

The methodology used included a literature review of relevant material at the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center, the reference library at the University of Texas at Dallas, and a search of the Internet. This research project used descriptive research to answer the following research questions:

1. What percentage of the fire departments surveyed in the State of Texas have Employee Suggestion Programs and what percentage with programs have had positive results and implemented suggestions?
2. What are the components of successful Employee Suggestion Programs in private and public sector organizations, i.e., rules, structure, rewards, etc.?
3. What are examples of positive suggestions received from fire departments in the State of Texas through a formal Employee Suggestion Program that have been implemented and benefited the department?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Employee suggestion systems have a long history of accomplishment, especially in the private sector. They are a major established way in which to tap the enormous creative potential of the non-management personnel on the job. The central focus of this Applied Research Project is to explore conditions and applications of employee suggestion systems that may lead to productivity improvements in a public sector organization, specifically the Dallas Fire Department.

In departments without a formal suggestion program, suggestions are usually routed through the chain of command where they should arrive at the executive level. After evaluation, good suggestions should be sent to the proper division for budget impact

review and if possible, implementation. The problem is that this process is often unsuccessful in implementing suggestions. A cartoon on one organization's bulletin board read: "We'll run your idea through the proper channels. One flush should do it" (Verespej, 1992, p. 11). One reason this method is not successful is that a supervisor can just *sit on* a suggestion for whatever reason the individual deems necessary. Often the individual's supervisor may simply say, "Good idea- now you make it work" without much support or funding. The public sector is good at funding capital improvements for hundreds of thousands of dollars but trying to get an unbudgeted item for less than one thousand paid for is another story, even if the improvement in productivity is obvious. After a member has a couple of good suggestions ignored or lost in the process and never come to fruition, they easily lose interest in making improvement suggestions. A formal Employee Suggestion Program, that has support from senior management, is a recognized, consistent, and institutionalized way to encourage employee participation. These programs demonstrate that employees, as well as management, have the capacity to engage in creatively resolving one of the most critical needs of the public sector -- the improvement in productivity.

In the Executive Leadership course at the National Fire Academy, the topic of Creative Leadership asked the questions: "Does the leader create opportunities? Is support provided to followers? Are followers empowered?" Confident Leadership asks the question, "Does the leader display confidence, both in self and in followers?" There is a necessity to move from the reactionary paradigm of change to developing proactive change by anticipating and developing a willingness to move from the established paradigm. Realizing that improving a department's suggestion process will not only

enhance the organization and make it more effective but will also empower its members by displaying confidence in their abilities and demonstrate the leader is open to all opinions. A primary function of leadership in the fire service is taking action wherever appropriate and not waiting for a significant incident to drive the process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Suggestion Systems

To develop a successful Employee Suggestion Program, it is not sufficient support from the executive level to simply issue a memorandum stating they "...support the suggestion system in all its phases," (R. Bell, 1997, p. 22) and let it go at that. Lip service by top management will provide the fatal strike against any suggestion system. The system must be announced properly to all employees to get complete attention and participation. A subcommittee should be appointed to design communications methods, including media, timing, content, and speakers. The subcommittee should also consider the ongoing aspect of maintaining a high level of interest in the system through periodic announcements and promotion. The subcommittee can consider a variety of ways of introducing the suggestion system. Several good ideas include banners, videotapes of the local executive's announcement, home mailers, handouts, and departmental meetings.

Above all, Bell (1997) states the program needs continual executive level commitment and support to be successful. It needs this level of support to make the necessary changes to the organization. Executives who are serious about cultivating creative thinking in their company provide a means for it to happen. Employees are asked to recommend ways to perform the work better, to improve quality, save money,

and please customers. This will distinguish itself from the competition or in the public sector, improve past performance.

Doing some research within your own organization and determining what suggestions have been implemented in the past is an excellent place to begin as stated by K. Matthes (1992) in his article on empowering employees through suggestion. Publicize the new program by indicating what improvements that employee suggestions have made in the past. Begin to keep complete and accurate records of all transactions relating to the new suggestion system. Many experts suggest that employers encourage employee participation first by emphasizing quantity of ideas. Once the program is under way, however, employers should emphasize the quality of suggestions. Cynthia McCabe, president of the National Association of Suggestion Systems states, "In the beginning, it is good just to stimulate awareness and get people used to the process" (Bell, 1997, p.24).

K. Trunko (1993) in his article on employee suggestion states that a reward system should ideally identify what type of awards will be established and then follow through with it. A suggestion system can be a money saver to an organization. Tangible ideas that result in measurable increases in productivity through better use of resources or reduction in human capital should be rewarded with monetary awards. He further states that employees in the private sector are often rewarded for their suggestions with 50% of the tangible savings realized up to \$2,500. Intangible ideas that do not directly affect profitability or cost savings, such as safety improvements, could be rewarded with additional leave, special recognition, or a small bonus.

It is not that difficult to establish a monetary reward system for suggestions with support of top management states K. Walter (1992) in *Personnel Journal*. When a cost

saving or additional revenue suggestion is developed, a portion of the savings that occur during that budget period could be returned to the employee. It is simply a matter of establishing the program; the money would be there through the savings. Even items like a watch with the department logo, or other reasonably priced gifts can hold a high trophy value. They tend to carry more recognition than smaller amounts of cash and cannot be confused with regular wages or bonuses. Above all, thank them. Take time to personally thank employees who made the effort, and may have taken a risk, to suggest an improvement. Do this even before you say what you plan to do with their idea.

Bell (1997) also recommends establishing a standing committee for evaluation of employee suggestions. The basis of the structure should be a committee of reasonable size (10 to 15 people) representing all strata of the organization and the demographic makeup of the total employee population. The members may divide into subcommittees to consider and administer various phases of the program. This committee will decide all matters regarding the method of obtaining, evaluating, and rewarding suggestions. With the responsibility to actually conduct the evaluations, it should have the authority to call employees or supervisors for interviews, request studies, or take other actions necessary to properly evaluate the suggestion. The committee chair should rotate annually and report to the organization executive with responsibility for the suggestion program.

The committee will establish its own schedule of meetings, negotiate a budget with management, and be held responsible for the program's success. Should glitches be found, it will be the committee's responsibility to dig them out and solve them through the reporting relationship with the executive (Bell, 1997).

In an article in *Executive Female* (1996, p.19-20), entitled *6 Ways To Get Ideas From Employees*, it states that one of the oldest forms of employee involvement is the suggestion system. Management should not just act like they value their employees but truly value them for their knowledge. It suggests demonstrating this by asking them for their ideas. It may seem silly, but one of the biggest reasons employees do not pass their ideas up the line is that no one asks them. Beg your people for recommendations if you must. Make your desire for employee suggestions well known in your written and spoken pronouncements. Don't let up. After a while they will believe that management truly wants their ideas and values their contributions.

Organizations that are serious about being competitive, or as in the public sector, being more productive or responsive, can benefit from employee input. After all, who better to make recommendations for improvement than the people doing the work? But a good idea can only be the beginning of the process. Current thinking about suggestions systems advocates a continuous improvement approach (Davis, 1989). Critics of traditional systems argue that they do too little, too late. Only a few people may receive awards or recognition on rare occasions. Many good ideas can be rejected because the system does little to reinforce the idea that improvement is an ongoing process.

Suggestions systems based on continuous improvement focus on the process and not the product or idea. Rather than stuffing a *suggestion box* and waiting to learn of the status of the idea, the system should seek to involve people at all stages of the process. A continuous improvement based on a suggestion system begins with the assumption that there are no bad ideas. It is a matter of identifying the correct cause of the problem, then

coming up with the right solution for it. If done correctly, every idea generated is a good one even if the suggested solution is incorrect or unfeasible (Davis, 1989).

Another principle in developing an employee suggestion program is to get back with them quickly. Employees should never say, “I wonder what they did with that idea I submitted six months ago” (Executive Female, 1996, p.20). Convene a group to help you evaluate and decide what to do about each employee suggestion. Respond quickly, even telling the submitter that you need a little extra time to decide what to do. In this way, they will not feel they are being ignored or that management may be taking credit for their suggestion.

Standardized forms are another method to simplify the process of suggesting for the employees. Design these as a guide to individuals making suggestions through the submission, review, and implementation process. The form can have check boxes to quickly identify what type of suggestion that is submitted. Sections such as the old method, new method, advantages of new method and a list of persons who could evaluate the idea will make it easy to complete the suggestion process and organize the thoughts for the person suggesting the idea (Walter, 1992).

Providing an environment whereby managers and supervisors are receptive to ideas from subordinates is important. Management should demonstrate open encouragement in its attitude and handling of suggestions, including managers periodically soliciting their employees for ideas. Having confident and secure managers that supervise employees directly is a key component. Many employees withhold good ideas when they discover their immediate supervisor feels threatened by their idea submissions. A suggestion for improvement is not a challenge to their management ability. The person who handles a

job is no doubt qualified to figure out how it might be done better – or even if it needs to be done at all. If a manager who reports to an executive seems threatened by innovative staffers, try exposing them to solid leadership training, maintain an ongoing positive coaching relationship, and see that they continually update their knowledge in the field (Supervision, 1994).

In the article, *Suggestion Systems Gain New Luster* by M. Verespej (1992, p.11), he suggests for an organization that is beginning an employee suggestion program, a promotional strategy should be developed to communicate the elements of the program effectively. Develop a catchy name, or theme, and a logo that reflects the program's intent. A phrase like *Bright Ideas* or *Everyone Counts* will be more exciting than *The Suggestion Program* and should stick with employees longer. You may want to emblazon the program name and logo on every bit of information you send out on the program. Kick off the event with an official launch to the suggestion program and explain the specifics, what you want to accomplish and how employees can participate – and what rewards they will receive for making suggestions. Distribute announcement brochures to reinforce what is said at the kick off to spell out the rules and add this information to the employee handbook. Send out promotional items regularly to remind people that the suggestion program is alive and kicking. Publish articles in the newsletter, display posters, and set up award ceremonies to maintain momentum for the program. When suggestions are adopted, let everyone know by sending send out announcements to all employees and displaying the suggester's photo on company bulletin boards. Periodic reports to keep management and employees informed of cost savings and other relevant information is also a good idea.

Fritsch (1985) also recommends providing a means to publicize suggestions on a regular basis. A photographer can record the event of the employee accepting an award for an adopted suggestion. Make sure the suggestion program gets adequate publicity in the local community news media if the suggestion is of substantial merit. When major awards are presented for adopted suggestions, an executive officer should be there to make the presentation. An executive should sign the letters that adopt or reject suggestions. In either letter, the employee should be encouraged to continue his or her contributions of ideas to the system.

The eligibility of a suggestion depends in large part upon the suggester's job, meaning not within the scope of their duties to solve a particular problem; however, there are some other factors. One definition offered by Downey and Balk (1976, p15) states, "A suggestion is an expression of an original, positive, constructive thought, voluntarily offered by the employee who conceived it for the purpose of benefiting the company." The key words: original, positive, constructive, and benefiting the company will exclude suggestions that are:

- Duplicates of past suggestions
- Duplicates of suggestions under considerations
- More costly to implement than the benefits
- Personal complaints
- Bargainable under a labor agreement or pertaining to conditions of employment
- Not related to work of the company
- Company patents

While employee suggestion systems show signs of life in the public sector, the movement is far from vigorous and progress slow and spotty. As stated by Downey and Balk (1976, p. 32), “Relatively few states and local governments offer integrated suggestion programs; when they do, participation is generally low and results are far from spectacular.” They begin by offering this reason that can be true in both the private and public sector. At the heart of the problem is that suggestion systems present a challenge or even a threat to those trained in traditional management ways. Another reason they relate is that public agencies do not possess the internal control ability of their counterparts in private business. They are highly permeable by legislative, judicial, and constituency influences. This means that while public agency organization charts show specific lines of authority, decisions are often made in seemingly mysterious and “political” ways. Since public agencies must be more open to outside influence, this has an effect upon the way the organization is set up internally and the nature of controls (p.34).

A final concept submitted by Downey and Balk (p.39) is that productivity cannot be readily transferred from business, where it is equated with efficiency or the relationship of output to input. In the public sector, productivity is often more associated with the quality concept that is more effectiveness than efficiency. This must be tailored and clearly integrated into the overall improvement philosophy in dealing with employee suggestion systems. The merit of a suggestion must be considered and the extent of the benefits derived from implementation. There are two types of benefits, tangible (measured in dollars) and intangible (not measured in dollars). Suggestions should be divided into one of these two categories.

Tangible benefits depend to a great extent upon an understanding of how to measure government work. There is no real technological difficulty in measuring a large percentage of the work in government. The reason is that many of the tasks are relatively routine, and we can apply well-established work standards. In these cases, suggestions that reduce cost expenditures can receive cash awards based on a percentage of savings up to a predetermined limit. Intangible benefits are represented in examples such as better communication, better service, better quality, or increased safety. These benefits and improvements in non-routine tasks will require being evaluated by a committee using subjective judgements. It is best to arrive at some agreement by the committee members using an established a scoring system. Awards of recognition for intangible benefits can include certificates, plaques, letters of commendation, pins, etc., in conjunction with smaller cash awards (Downey & Balk, p. 16, 40-43).

Management Change Models

Seamless Government, by Russell Linden (1994, p.183) discusses the problem of alignment in organizations and describes it as "... the degree of congruence or consistency within an agency's culture: How well the various systems, structures, messages (both spoken and unspoken), and styles support and reinforce each other on an everyday basis." A leader who preaches the importance of a particular function then fails to address the issue in an employee performance review is sending a mixed message. This organization is out of alignment concerning evaluations and what is considered positive performance. Executives are often required as part of their Performance Plan to

solicit suggestions from rank and file members and implement improvements; although, members are often not encouraged or rewarded for their efforts in the suggestion process.

J. Pfeffer (1998, p.122) in, *The Human Equation*, develops an insight into aligned organizational practices and states the internal logic that implements the organization's strategy does not rely on a few "big brains or great ideas". But rather effective performance and ideas come from the entire organization. An aligned organization does not have to worry about its senior executive to survive but knows the essential tasks are to build a system that can learn, develop, and produce superior results over time. Putting people first is the most important concept to organizational success. Every other source of organizational success – technology, financial structure, and competitive strategy -- can be imitated in an amazingly short period of time.

This idea of employee involvement as the first and most fundamental principle is stressed when Pfeffer (1998, p.124) states, "The essence of high performance work arrangements is reliance on all organizational members for their ideas, intelligence, and commitment to making the organization successful." Aligning the organization and an employee suggestion program with the vision and mission statement is not an easy task. First, executives need to share that vision. Employee ideas increase in value when staff members are on the same page with the executive. They are empowered to help when they know the dream management hopes to realize. If the executive has a vision for the organization, communicate that vision so that the employees can help the organization get there.

The Balanced Scorecard is a management model designed by R. Kaplan and D. Norton (1996) that suggests a philosophy that retains conventional financial

measurements to reflect an organization's performance but also develops three other key perspectives: customer, internal processes, and learning and growth. In other words, cutting costs wherever you can is not the entire story for organizational success. Kathy Saldarini (1999, p.1) also supports this idea by stating, "Employees traditionally have been viewed through the budgetary lens, and therefore they have often been seen as costs to be cut rather than assets to be appreciated."

The scorecard provides a framework to communicate mission and strategy by becoming an informing and learning system, not a controlling system. The Balanced Scorecard can be used as a strategic framework to accomplish four main goals:

- Clarify and Translate Vision and Strategy
- Communicating and Linking Goals and Rewards to Performance Measures
- Planning and Setting Targets of Strategic Initiatives and Establishing Milestones
- Strategic Feedback and Learning by Facilitating Review of Performance

The Balanced Scorecard not only measures change but it also fosters change. Thus it can provide the front-end justification, as well as the focus and integration for continuous improvement. Balanced Scorecards usually aim to meet requirements of all stakeholders or groups with a stake in the organization's success that must be successful for the organization to succeed. They typically include customers, shareholders, senior management, employees, suppliers, the community and in the public sector, governmental regulators (Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

Three principles appear common to most of the successful transformations to high performance work practices that are observed by Pfeffer (1998, p.124). These principles

are "...to build trust, encourage change, and measure the right things and align incentive systems with new practices." These high performance practices lead to employee empowerment. This empowerment should not stop at the suggestion process. It will be continuous improvement that will carry members forward into the implementation and follow-up phases. In these final phases they have the opportunity to experience the effect of their own ideas and therein lies another reward.

The Japanese have perfected the process of continual improvement through an organized system of employee suggestions called KAIZEN—Continuous and Constant Improvement through Suggestions. Thomas W. Davis (1989, p. 204-205) states that Japanese manufacturing plants are often much more productive than their American counterparts through suggestions produced by the KAIZEN program. He states that Japanese manufacturing facilities have not only sought suggestions and input from their production workers, but have demanded it. It is supported by continually giving plaques, medals, trophies, and rewards. The process begins by employees submitting suggestion forms to their supervisors called Process Improvement Forms, or Opportunity Forms. Supervisors have a certain amount of time to acknowledge receipt and respond as to whether the suggestion will be implemented or not. Various categories include process improvement, cost reduction, quality improvement and time reduction. An award program recognizes the best suggestions. If executives place an emphasis on the suggestion process and acts on them, then employees will submit the ideas.

S. Cohen and W. Elimicke (1998, p.6) in *Tools for Innovators*, state, "A key here is not to compare the public sector directly to manufacturing where you might graph suggestions with overall cost savings, but to realize that improvement is always possible

in any organization and the employees are an excellent source of information.”

Furthermore, they describe that public management innovation is rarely characterized by revolutionary breakthroughs. Instead it typically involves rearranging old practices in new ways. They believe innovation is often incremental and small scale in the public sector because of its goals, mission, and the external environment. Change is often slower in the public sector; nonetheless, an employee suggestion program can be associated directly with any organizational change technique. Suggestions that deal with responding to events in the external arena can be used for strategic planning and responding to future needs. Ideas suggested for macro-internal improvements may be used in reengineering plans and micro-internal suggestions will assist with an organization’s Total Quality Management endeavors.

Problems Enacting Change

Gary Turner (1987, p. 26, 33-36) in his article *Butting Heads Over Change*, suggests that the fire service, where working conditions are far different from what they are in most other occupations, the status quo puts up a particularly strong resistance to change. The most entrenched part of the fire service status quo is its quasi-military nature and hierarchical structure of command. While this type of organization may be the most effective for fire suppression activities, it’s not conducive to implementing changes. He states that most fire departments have failed to keep up with the evolution of management theory and operate in the Frederick Taylor’s Scientific Theory Approach, which emphasized a “one best method” to perform work – managers assume that there is no reason to fix something that is not broken.

Turner (1987) emphasizes that the fire service may be stalled half way to more participative forms of management with examples of task forces or quality circles. However, we primarily use these methods for problem identification and resolution but seldom for evaluation. When mid-level officers have presented their findings and views about proposed changes and the chief has made a decision, any disagreements must be reserved.

Often a common problem with implementation of productivity improvement innovations such as TQM or Employee Suggestion Programs is that many organizations implement them at a *token level* rather than fully committing themselves to success. K. Miller (1993, p. 23) states that this token implementation, or paying lip service, occurs because organizations and individuals receive recognition and other benefits from being, or appearing to be in line with current thinking, while avoiding the risks of actual innovation. He further states that token implementation also occurs as a result of flawed implementation plans, inadequate commitment and follow through by those initiating the innovation, a lack of training in applying the innovation and incongruent organizational practices.

PROCEDURES

Research Methodology

The procedure used in preparing this research began with an extensive literature review at the Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the National Fire Academy in June of 2000. Information at the LRC concerning Employee Suggestion Programs in the fire service was virtually nonexistent. A considerable amount of information was found

relating to rewards and recognition of members or changing organization culture but only a limited amount of this material could be applied to suggestion systems. An additional search conducted by the staff at the LRC in August 2000 failed to provide any additional information on the topic.

In September 2000, a review of material on the Internet led to information on various private sector companies that provide training to organizations for establishing suggestion programs. A search of the University of Texas at Dallas' library's management texts supplied information on organizational change and improvement techniques. The periodical electronic databases, such as ProQuest Direct and InfoTrac Expanded Academic Index, revealed various profession journals with articles concerning Employee Suggestion Programs but were primarily related to the private sector.

To determine if any fire departments in the State of Texas have a formal Employee Suggestion Program and if they determined it to be successful, a survey instrument was developed. The survey consisted of three questions with the question on their current suggestion program having twelve (12) sections to mark if their program contained one of these particular functions. There was an additional request for a copy of their employee suggestion program if they have one. A copy of the survey is Appendix A.

Population of the Survey

In November 2000, the survey was mailed to fifty-five (55) Fire Chiefs in the State of Texas selecting departments serving populations of over one million residents to departments serving less than ten thousand. All of the individuals surveyed were members of the Texas Fire Chiefs Association. The State of Texas was selected as a

database to get a representation of various size departments and an attempt to increase the percentage of responses returned by selecting a region that included the author's department.

Assumptions and Limitations

The distribution of the survey was not designed to create an accurate random sampling of all the departments in the State of Texas. Forty-two (42) of the fifty-five (55) surveys were returned in six weeks with three (3) providing a copy of their Employee Suggestion Program. It should be noted that the motivation in the private sector for providing an employee suggestion system, at least in part, is to increase productivity that potentially improves profit. However, there is no evidence that the lack of a profit motive is justification for the limited number of suggestion programs among emergency services employers in the public sector.

RESULTS

Research Questions

The first research question was answered from the survey and concerned what percentage of fire departments surveyed in the State of Texas have an Employee Suggestion Program and whether they consider it to have positive results. The response to this question was that only 26 % of the departments (11 out of 42) have a formal program; however, 82% of these departments stated they have had positive results. 9% stated the results were not positive and 9% stated the program was too new to determine at the present time.

The second question asked what are the components of successful Employee Suggestion Programs in private and public sector organizations, i.e., rules, structure, rewards, etc., and what percentage of departments use these components? The components to develop were primarily found in the Literature Review and the percentage of the departments using each of these components is listed below:

1. An Evaluation Committee for Suggestions -- 64%
2. Developed Time Frame for Response on Suggestions -- 45%
3. An Established Reward Structure (e.g., percent of cost savings and/or predetermined gifts/ time off, etc.) -- 64%
4. Conduct a Formal Ceremony for Recognition/Awards – 36%
5. Implemented Suggestions Publicized in the Department (e.g., Newsletters, etc.) – 45%
6. Executive Support and Involvement (e.g., personal involvement through presentation of awards, communication with members, etc.) – 45%
7. Training for Members to Foster Suggestions – 9%
8. Training for Officers to Assist/Encourage Suggestions (i.e., rather than feeling threatened by good suggestions) – 9%
9. Use a Standardized Form for Submission of Suggestions – 55%
10. Materials Printed to Advertise the Program (e.g., for Bulletin Boards, distribution to members, logo, etc.) – 55%
11. Credit Given to Members on Performance Evaluations – 18%
12. Suggestions Used with TQM, Re-engineering, Balanced Scorecard, Customer Service or other Management Programs) – 9%

The third research question was also answered from the survey and asked what are some positive examples of suggestions implemented through the Employee Suggestion Program. There were very few responses and they are listed below:

- Response of truck company (in addition to pumper and EMS unit) to Motor Vehicle Accidents on freeways to increase safety by blocking additional lanes of traffic, etc.
- Various suggestions for cost savings on items to be purchased
- Station uniform changes
- Battery storage sock to keep extra batteries dry
- Policy changes
- New equipment suggestions

The final request was for departments with Employee Suggestion Programs to return a copy of their program with the survey. Three (3) departments returned a copy of their program and a sample is Appendix C.

Assistance with Establishing Suggestion Programs

The search of the Internet revealed several companies that assist organizations with developing Employee Suggestion Programs. The Center for Suggestion System Development (www.suggestsystems.com) in Orlando FL, will build and design a program and assist with implementation. They will establish rules for the program, eligibility of suggestions, appropriate awards structure, evaluation methods for suggestions and develop a record management system. This training can be through attending seminars at their location (at \$1,000 per person plus travel and accommodations), telephone consulting at an hourly rate, and in-house consulting and training that can be customized for any organization's needs. The client list primarily

contains private sector organizations (e.g., Anheuser Bush, Mobile Oil, Motorola, etc.) but does include these public sector organizations: The City of Arlington, Texas (this Suggestion Program included in Appendix C), Los Angeles Dept. of Water & Power, and the U.S. Army, Navy, and Postal Service. Other companies found that consult on Employee Suggestion Programs include Charles W. Raymond Incentives (www.members.js-net.com), Ideas Management (www.ideasmanagement.com), and Employers of America (www.biztrain.com).

DISCUSSION

Survey Findings

In reviewing the information received from the surveys, the lack of departments with an Employee Suggestion Program (26%) was not surprising in view of Garry Turner's comments concerning the fire service's strong resistance to change because of the nature of the work and the quasi-military nature/hierarchical structure of command. Some comments from the fire chiefs surveyed stated that the program became a complaint mechanism, required too much work to address issues and that anonymous suggestions were "too frank" and dealt primarily with personnel issues. The author feels that these problems could be addressed by properly administering a program with qualifications for submissions, a printed suggestion form and training for the department.

Another response from the fire chiefs in the survey was that related programs served the same purpose as an Employee Suggestion Program. Some examples are: (1) that questionnaires were sent to the membership asking what changes they felt the organization needed (2) the use of an open door policy (3) the department formed

committees for important projects (4) used an “Ask the Chief” newsletter and (5) the Fire Chief Advisory Board makes recommendations and suggests employee awards. In addition, 40% of the departments with an Employee Suggestion Program stated that the program was part of a citywide program with the purpose of the program being primarily for cost savings with participants receiving a percentage of the savings up to a predetermined amount.

Employee Suggestion Programs and the Balanced Scorecard

The concept developed by Downey and Balk of the categories of suggestions, tangible and intangible, delineating suggestions that are a cost savings and those that improve the organization by other means might be taken a step further. It would include the concepts developed by Kaplan and Norton with the Balanced Scorecard and its four major parts: Financial, Customer, Internal Business Process, and Learning and Growth.

The suggestion program would be developed with these four broad categories of suggestions. On the submission forms, a category must be selected to emphasize the concept that a suggestion should be organized into one of the categories. The best suggestion in each category per year could receive additional rewards or recognition to increase participation in each of the categories.

The first category for suggestions, the ones that improve the financial performance of the organization, i.e., a tangible suggestion, could be a reduction in supplies, utilities, overtime or any other resource that would reduce financial expenditures. Certainly by measuring with standard tools, fire departments can improve in this area. Nonetheless, the financial measures do not reveal the complete picture about performance, particularly

in the public sector, and they fail to translate a company's vision and strategy into performance measures.

The second category of suggestions, the customer perspective, should suggest improvements in customer satisfaction or develop a process to anticipate customer needs and new services that customer's value. The image and reputation dimension also reflects intangible factors that often go well beyond the delivered quality of a product or service.

The third area for a suggestion program that relates to the Balanced Scorecard would be the internal process perspective. In the public sector, this should begin with identifying internal customer needs and developing new solutions for these needs. The ideas should include innovative suggestions to increase quality, throughput, and operational efficiencies for all internal customers. For example, this is where improvements in maintenance, dispatch, fiscal affairs, equipment selection, or facility design improvements should be suggested.

The final section or category of the Employee Suggestion Program would include the employee learning and growth perspective. This section emphasizes that people are an organization's greatest resource and they will work harder and smarter when a department encourages the building of skills and competence. Training and professional development should not only be encouraged, but rewarded. The three principle parts of this section are employee capabilities, information systems capabilities, and motivation. This section would support the perspective that employee satisfaction, retention and productivity are all related. Kaplan and Norton (1996, p.130) state, "Satisfied employees are a precondition for increasing productivity responsiveness, quality, and customer

service. Employees that scored highest in satisfaction surveys tended to have the most satisfied customers.”

Alignment and Empowering Employees

In dealing with alignment issues developed by Linden (1994) he discusses the need for consistency within an agency’s culture. A goal of an Employee Suggestion Program should be to align the member’s evaluations with the program by including a category for suggestions. These could include a variety of suggestions, suggestions adopted, and a narrative of the benefits derived from the suggestion. In this way, the members are recognized for their suggestions and understand that the organization does value their input.

Empowering employees, the concept of ownership, and sharing and making contributions in the workplace has been around for some time. The value of an employee suggestion program can go beyond the value of particular ideas or improvements. It can establish a positive human equation between management and employees, where they can reach their full potential, e.g., the upper level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (self-actualization: reaching one’s full potential).

All employees have specialized knowledge relating to their own job and to things they observe around them. However, many are hesitant about openly expressing their ideas for improvement. Active, interested management support is the key for success of an Employee Suggestion Program. The aims and follow-through by management will determine the success of the program. If management wants the program to succeed, it has to provide the proper environment for this to happen. A soundly based, well-run

program can help cut costs, increase profits, improve job efficiency, and communications. This will boost employee morale by keeping everyone involved as a contributing member of the organization. At the very least, when you get the creative juices flowing from everyone in the department, you should have a lot less complaining!

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fire Service Organizations

There is a great deal of success with Employee Suggestion Programs in the private sector. However, the survey demonstrated that these programs are not in wide spread use by fire departments in the State of Texas. This is clearly archaic thinking that will ultimately be counterproductive to an organization. Nearly as damaging to an organization is a management team that may have the best intentions but for various reasons never takes the time to create a program and value the input from its members. This sends a strong message to the employees that management just doesn't care, so why should they improve the organization. A probable long-term effect will be low morale and the accompanying manifestation of symptoms such as excessive sick leave, lackluster performance, and poor customer service. It is recommended that all fire service organizations, regardless of their size, develop and implement an Employee Suggestion Program.

Assistance with Implementation

Due to the nature of the public sector function, especially that a fire department is primarily a service organization, most suggestions will be intangible (not a direct cost savings). Developing a program for the public sector is more difficult because the cost

reduction motive is not the primary driving component and that added political constraints are an additional factor. It is recommended that assistance from a professional organization be solicited to develop an Employee Suggestion Program. If the program is worth doing, it is worth doing right. Simply placing a suggestion box in the fire station will not suffice for an effective program. There are several companies that consult organizations on suggestion systems and some have experience with the public sector. At the very least, benchmark another city or fire department with a successful program.

The Program

Kaplan and Norton's Balanced Scorecard has its greatest impact when it is deployed to drive organizational change. Using it with an Employee Suggestion Program provides the front-end justification, as well as focus and integration for continuous improvement. In addition, requiring suggestions to be placed in one of the four categories will foster alignment within the organization and deter "ineligible" suggestions that did not relate to one of the categories. Another important factor is executive involvement from the beginning and demonstrating visible support to the members. A final suggestion about the components of the program is to ensue as many of the following functions are included as possible:

- An Evaluation Committee for Suggestions
- Developed Time Frame for Response on Suggestions
- An Established Reward Structure (e.g., percent of cost savings and/or predetermined gifts/ time off, etc.)
- Conduct a Formal Ceremony for Recognition/Awards

- Implemented Suggestions Publicized in the Department (e.g., Newsletters, etc.)
- Executive Support and Involvement (e.g., personal involvement through presentation of awards, communication with members, etc.)
- Training for Members to Foster Suggestions
- Training for Officers to Assist/Encourage Suggestions (i.e., rather than feeling threatened by good suggestions)
- Use a Standardized Form for Submission of Suggestions
- Materials Printed to Advertise the Program (e.g., for Bulletin Boards, distribution to members, logo, etc.)
- Credit Given to Members on Performance Evaluations

Ancillary Benefits

There is a common denominator among successful organizations in recent years - employee empowerment. By installing a series of highly effective and employee-friendly work practices, many organizations have been able to use employee knowledge to improve organization performance. Ideally, there should be workplace opportunities for employees to positively affect their own job and personal growth. If an organization neglects the human side of the workplace equation, the neglected employees will find a way to assert their humanity—usually in ways that do not contribute to an organization's success. An Employee Suggestion Program brings these intrinsic factors to the workplace in addition to solving problems and making the organization more effective.

Dallas Fire Department

The City of Dallas is beginning a new Strategic Plan Initiative for the year 2000. This includes a new Mission and Vision Statement, new Employee Performance Plans, and Balanced Scorecards for each department with an Annual Performance Report. The inclusion of an Employee Suggestion Program would benefit the Dallas Fire Department by demonstrating that we have no *sacred cows* that are above review and possible discontinuation and we sincerely plan to *walk the talk*.

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“Appendices A, B, and C Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at <http://www.lrc.fema.gov> to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.”