



Dear Chief

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COLUMNIST

DEAR CHIEF: I’m a vice president for a coat manufacturing company and am having difficulty getting viable suggestions and ideas from my people. It’s like no one cares about being creative in any way. Everyone seems happy to do just do what they’re told. I tell them all the time I want to hear ideas of new and innovative ways to do things but no one ever says or submits anything. Maybe I need to begin replacing them through attrition with people cultured with creativity. Any suggestions to get my people to open up?

I NEED SOME ANSWERS



DEAR I NEED SOME ANSWERS: Sparking creativity is very challenging when people in the organization don’t open up very easily.

First of all, don’t begin firing anyone. It appears you may not have a culture for openness or you’re not asking them the right questions.

As a leader, are you open and candid with people throughout your organization? Just telling people to be creative and give you ideas will not work if they sense that you’re not really open or authentic with them. Do you openly share information or are matters closed and secretive? Are your actions and policies transparent to everyone or is there a lot of fog and confusion associated with them? Do your words match your actions or is what you do not often in sync with what you say? Are you willing to listen to other points of view with the possibility of adapting or

Openness sparks creativity

changing or is your mind typically made up and others’ input is basically a verbal exercise in futility?

Some leaders and managers don’t know it but they’re walking around with a blinking red light on their forehead announcing, “Beware, don’t trust me!” They think they’re perceived by others as being open but they’re actually not. If you really want to know the real perception, you’ll have to ask your people directly. How do you do that when you’re having difficulty getting them to open up in the first place? Utilize the anonymous survey technique.

Don’t do it by email or electronically. Instead, print out your survey and allow them to take them home to complete. Ensure there is no place on the form to include their name. Have a disinterested third party collect the forms or place a locked box in an unmonitored area for them to drop them off in. Don’t force anyone to fill them out.

Be sure to let everyone know you’re trying to learn about yourself for the sake of awareness and self-improvement. Emphasize anonymity in the process.

When reviewing the results, understand some people rate or tell you what they think you want to hear. Others will use the opportunity throw darts at you. For the best interpretation of the results, eliminate perfect or near perfect scores and the lowest or worst results. This doesn’t mean you don’t need to improve. Instead, the idea is to produce a bell curve to see how most followers rate your openness.

In the past, I used an “Open Assessment” document provided by Sheila Murray Bethel, Ph.D. It’s available

at no cost—you can download at: www.bethelinstitute.com/downloads/nbl_openness_assessment.pdf

If you conduct the survey and it’s determined that you have a culture for openness, then try asking your people these types of questions when seeking their ideas and suggestions:

“If we didn’t care what it cost, how would we solve this?”

“If we were starting from scratch, how would we handle this?”

“If we really didn’t need anyone’s authorization, what would we do?”

“If we didn’t care what anyone else thought, how would we act?”

“If this were a perfect world, what would our next step be?”

“If we’d be respected no matter what we proposed, what would we propose?”

These types of questions give them some degree of focus and can bring out creativity in their thoughts. You would be amazed at some of the answers you would get and even more amazed how some proposed solutions could be quite feasible, and you would have never thought of them on your own.

So try one of my suggestions. I’d be interested in knowing which one works for you. Feel free to write back to me and let me know how things turn out. Good luck!



For an opportunity to have your question, issue or concern addressed in the Dear Chief column, go to www.DearChiefAdvice.com and submit your comments or email them to Jeff@DearChiefAdvice.com.