# A BETTER EMPLOYEE SUGGESTION SYSTEM

By
Bob Mason

**RLM** PLANNING & LEADERSHIP
**PLAN – LEAD - EXCEL**

www.planleadexcel.com

April 2010

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

   Bob Mason is a speaker, consultant, author, and founder of RLM Planning and Leadership. He started the company after 30 years of leadership experience which taught him what does and doesn't work and how to modify leadership techniques to each situation. He has led organizations of a few people and many hundreds of people and has worked with many types of groups including government and non-profit.

   Through his years of experience, Bob has developed a unique strategic planning model which is the subject of his book, *Planning to Excel: Strategic Planning that Works*. He's used the model extensively to focus leaders and organizations to obtain maximum efficiency. He has successfully trained hundreds of leaders, emphasizing the importance of post-training follow-up to help emerging leaders effectively apply the skills and concepts they were taught. He passionately believes that without a plan, leaders don't know where to lead and without effective leaders the best plan will fail. Contact Bob at rlm@planleadexcel.com.

The suggestion box. Does it work for you? Often, they aren't very effective and some organizations don't even use them anymore. While suggestion boxes may not be very effective, receiving, and acting on, suggestions from members of the organization is vital and leads to improved employee engagement.

Engagement is one of those popular buzzwords in leadership. Many leaders search for ways to improve employee involvement in, and enthusiasm for, the organization. Workers who are engaged are more effective on the job, will provide more valuable contributions to success, and are more likely to stay with the organization. Engaged workers are those who feel they are a valuable part of the organization. To an engaged employee, it's not just a job, it's a challenge and an experience that helps them feel fulfilled.

There are various ways to help employees feel engaged. Each person is different and may have different motivators and needs; however, what's common among the large majority of workers in any type of organization is the positive result of knowing their leadership seriously considers their thoughts and ideas. In fact, surveys have shown that, at all levels, being a valued member of the team is often more important than additional compensation. It's human nature to enjoy appreciation for our talents and abilities.

There are all sorts of suggestions about how to demonstrate appreciation for what a worker has done. When applied correctly, these are good things; however, one of the best ways to show someone you value them and what they do is to take their suggestions seriously. In what is really only a passing nod towards employee appreciation, many organizations have used the ubiquitous suggestion box. It's usually a wooden box mounted on a wall somewhere, often the break room, with a small slot on top through which the employee can slip in a piece of paper with their suggestion. A prominent lock accessible on by a manager secured the box. That manager would usually first peer through the little slot to see if there was anything in the box. If so, he or she would open the

box, take out the paper and; well, who knows. That piece of paper was usually never heard from again.

One result of this system was a suggestion box which was often the receptacle for gum wrappers, cigarette butts, and other trash. When a "suggestion" did appear, it often was not terribly helpful; more like a tirade about something a worker was mad about. Sometimes, suggestions included comments questioning a manger's heritage, or even offering advice that, while creative, was physically impossible. Why do these suggestion boxes get such abuse? Accountability! Workers knew that when they put something in the box, chances are they would never hear about it, or see a change. They simply didn't trust the leadership to take them seriously. Also, the suggestion box was often the domain of a lower level leader who didn't necessarily see a need to pass a suggestion on to someone who could actually implement it. After all, why bring more work on themselves?

There's a way to improve your organization's suggestion system that will ensure valuable ideas are solicited, and acted on. An organization can name their system anything they want, the name isn't important. What is important is the basic premise of the system which is that all members of the organization not only have a voice, but that their voice will be heard and seriously considered.

<u>A Better Suggestion System</u>

The system works in a hierarchical manner. A member of the organization submits an idea on a special form. There's no box for the form. Instead, the form is sent, emailed, or delivered in some other way to the system monitor. This person is the keeper of suggestions and is vital to the system as you will see. The monitor keeps a record of suggestions and assigns each one a

control number. Then he or she sends the suggestion to the first level supervisor of the suggestor's department.

That supervisor reviews the suggestion and either approves it at that level or forwards it to the next level for consideration. To forward the suggestion, the supervisor must return it to the monitor who records the action, then forwards it on. This process continues until the suggestion is either approved or it reaches the senior leader in the organization.

You'll note that there is no allowance for anyone to disapprove the suggestion. That's because this system does not grant the authority to disapprove to any level below the senior leader. A lower level leader is only permitted to approve, forward with comments, or recommend disapproval with justification.

By now you see the importance of the monitor. This person is the one who ensures the system's integrity. He or she prevents the problem of suggestions being ignored or lost, and, while every suggestion won't be approved, each one will receive the same level of consideration. I used my secretary as the monitor. A senior leader's secretary is in a unique position within an organization. He or she is very close to the boss, and is not subject to influence or coercion from other members of the organization. In my case, everyone knew my secretary was above reproach and trusted her to keep accurate track of each suggestion.

Let's look at the approval process in a little more detail. The purpose of what may seem a convoluted process is to provide the suggestor with a definite sense that his or her suggestion will not be lost or discarded without a fair hearing. Each leader along the way can approve and implement the suggestion if doing so is within that leader's authority. If the supervisor feels the suggestion should be approved, but implementation is not in his or her authority, they forward the suggestion to the next level with comments. If the supervisor feels the suggestion should be disapproved, they return it to the

monitor, with their comments explaining why they feel the suggestion should be disapproved, to be forwarded to the next level. The next leader in line does the same thing, approving, returning with comments, or returning with a recommendation to disapprove.

So who can disapprove the suggestion? This is one of the things that make this system so effective. Disapproval authority rests only with the senior leader. If a suggestion gets all the way to the top and still isn't approved, the senior leader will have a series of comments to help him or her make a good decision. When the suggestor receives the results, they'll know that at least their suggestion received an honest and thorough evaluation.

Of course, you may be the senior leader in your division, but what if the suggestion is something that is beyond your authority. Here's where you can really earn some credibility with your workers. Take that suggestion, with all the comments, to your boss and explain your system and why you're bringing the suggestion to them. That person can then approve or disapprove the suggestion. You can then tell the suggestor that you took the suggestion to a level above you and explain the results. Even if it was not approved, your subordinate will most likely be impressed that you went to that effort, especially when everyone knows you reserved disapproval authority for yourself and did not have to take it any further.

<u>The Form and Administration of the System</u>

A sample form is included in Appendix 1 to this paper, but its format is not critical. What is critical is that certain information is included.

Suggestor's name. You can allow an anonymous submission if you like. I always have, but I also make it clear that if I don't know who submitted it, I won't know who to return an answer to, or who to thank and or reward. I very

seldom received anonymous suggestions. Once you demonstrate the integrity of the system, people will want you to know who they are.

Control Number. This number is assigned by the system monitor and is one of the things that give the system its integrity. It also allows the monitor to track and follow up on each suggestion.

Demographic details. Such things as their office, email, phone number etc. This is largely for the monitor's use as they will need to be able to contact the suggestor. Also, they need to know what part of the organization he or she is from in order to properly start the process. If you allow anonymous submissions, you still must know where the suggestor works so the monitor will know where to send the suggestion for initial evaluation.

The suggestion. Leave plenty of room for the suggestor to clearly explain their idea. I include a note asking them to clearly explain their suggestion in detail. The more detail, the better evaluation it will receive. Another block on the form asks for a brief explanation of why they think the suggestion is necessary. Some people may not say much here, but any information will help you understand what the suggestor is thinking and can also give you a little insight into things you might not be aware of.

Supervisory reviews. This section should include space for the name, email, and phone number of the leaders in the review chain. Include sufficient space for them to make comments along with a simple check box for Approve, Forward with Comments, or Suggest Disapproval. You can include as many layers of leadership as you want, but I suggest keeping it to three or four. It isn't necessary to use all the blocks; only those needed to include the correct leaders in the review chain. The last review block is yours. Every suggestion, even if approved at the first level, must come to you before it is returned to the suggestor. More on that later.

If possible, make the form available on a company website. It's best is to make it a fillable form; but it can just simply be available for download.

Whatever method you use, make it as easy as possible, and give the suggestor an easy route directly to the system monitor.

The system monitor is one of the keys that make the system work. He or she should create a simple system of control numbers to assign to each suggestion. As soon as the monitor receives a suggestion, they assign a control number and forward the suggestion to the first supervisor. They also forward the control number to the suggestor. It isn't necessary for you, as the senior leader, to see the suggestion at this time. After each leader reviews the suggestion, they return it to the monitor. If it is not approved, the monitor sends it to the next person in line. When a supervisor returns the form without approving the suggestion, that person indicates on the form, the name, email, and phone number of the next leader in line.

If the suggestion is approved, the monitor notes that in his or her records and sends the suggestion, along with all comments, to you. As the senior leader, you should also check approved and sign the form. If the suggestion comes to you without approval, and you agree that it can't be approved, you should so state on the form and sign it. I'll discuss how to return the form to the suggestor shortly.

It's important to keep the suggestion moving. The monitor should give each leader in the chain a certain amount of time and hold them to that. My secretary was very good at this and no one dared miss her deadlines.

### The Senior Leader's Role

As the senior leader, you have the most critical role in this system. You must insist your subordinate leaders adhere not just to the rules of the system; but more importantly, to its spirit and intent. If everyone in the organization knows you enthusiastically support the system, it will work. But, if they don't think you support it, you won't get very many suggestions. A side benefit of

this program is that it provides you with a window on the organization that you might not otherwise have. For instance, I once received a suggestion that we make some major modifications to our website. The suggestion made it to me because, though subordinate leaders agreed, they did not have the ability to commit the necessary resources. The suggestion prompted me to take a good look at the website, which I seldom did, and I realized we had a problem. This suggestion resulted in us fixing a problem I didn't even know we had.

I suggest you develop a standard for responding to suggestions. Each suggestor, whether the suggestion was approved or disapproved, should receive a letter expressing your personal appreciation for taking the time to submit the suggestion. If possible, a small award of some sort should be included. If the suggestion is approved, then some reward and recognition appropriate to the impact of the suggestion should be included. Make sure that even the minimal award is something of at least some value. Public recognition is also appropriate, though it should be tempered to the individual's desires. As leaders, we sometimes expect everyone to have the Type A personalities we do, but that isn't always the case. Some people are genuinely embarrassed or even upset by a lot of public fuss. They will appreciate that letter with your thanks and whatever reward you feel is appropriate. However you decide to recognize the suggestor, always include the original suggestion form with your signature along with the letter of appreciation.

As you see, this system requires a small amount of time investment by you and your subordinate leaders. Additionally, you will need someone to be the system monitor which also will require a small amount of time. You will see though that this small investment of time and effort will pay dividends in improvements to all aspects of the organization. More importantly, the system will work toward improving your people's engagement.

| Your Name: | Control Number: |
|---|---|

| Your Email: | Your Phone Number: | Your Office: |
|---|---|---|

Your Suggestion: (Please be specific and include as much detail as possible. More detail will allow us to make a more complete evaluation of your suggestion.)

Why is this suggestion necessary?

| Your Supervisors Name, Email, and Phone Number: | ☐ Approve     ☐ Return With Comments<br>☐ Recommend Disapproval |
|---|---|

Supervisor's Comments:

| Your Supervisors Name, Email, And Phone Number: | ☐ Approve     ☐ Return With Comments<br>☐ Recommend Disapproval |
|---|---|

Supervisor's Comments:

| Your Supervisors Name, Email, And Phone Number: | ☐ Approve     ☐ Return With Comments<br>☐ Recommend Disapproval |
|---|---|

Supervisor's Comments:

**Suggestion is:   ☐ Approved   ☐ Disapproved**

Comments:

**RLM** PLANNING & LEADERSHIP

PLAN – LEAD - EXCEL

A-1

www.planleadexcel.com

## Instructions for Suggestion Form

Thank you for submitting a suggestion. Please fill out this form and send it to Ms Smith.

Name: Your first and last name.

Control Number: The control number will be assigned by Ms. Smith when she receives the form. She will tell you what the control number is.

Email, Phone Number, Office: This information will help Ms. Smith in routing the form and keeping you informed on its progress. Also, you may be contacted for more information or clarification.

Suggestion: Tell us what your suggestion is. Be specific and include as much detail as possible to help us understand and evaluate your suggestion.

Why you think this is important: In a few sentences, tell us why you thing this suggestion is necessary. You comments will help us understand the overall context of what you are suggesting.

Your supervisor's name, email, and phone number: As soon as Ms. Smith assigns a control number to the suggestion, she'll forward it to your supervisor for initial evaluation.

That's all! We'll take it from there.

## How the Suggestion System Works

Your supervisor will evaluate your suggestion. He or she has three options: either to approve it, forward it with comments (if he or she can't approve it), or recommend disapproval. Your supervisor cannot disapprove the suggestion! After evaluating the suggestion, your supervisor sends it back to Ms. Smith who will forward it to the next supervisor. This continues until your suggestion is either approved or reaches Mr. Jones' desk. He is the only one in the organization who can disapprove your suggestion. Ms. Smith will keep you informed of your suggestions progress and you will be notified of the final decision, by letter from Mr. Jones.

Again, thank you for taking the time to submit this suggestion and helping us make our organization better.