



When management demonstrates that employee feedback is genuinely valued, both retention and productivity show marked increases.

As first seen in *Employment Management Today* • Fall 2002

What If Your Water Cooler Could Talk?

By Peter W. Lilienthal

It's a fact. Employees congregate around water coolers. And when they do, they chat about what's on their minds. Some conversations are about personal lives. But often, much of the discussion is about what's going on in the workplace. If management could capture its company-related water cooler talk, what comments, suggestions and gripes might it hear? Consider these possibilities:

- "Have you tried dealing with our health insurance company lately? They're so arrogant. All management wants to do is save money, but I bet *they* don't have this kind of trouble scheduling doctor's appointments and getting insurance claims handled."
- "I don't know whose brilliant idea it was to change the accounts receivable screens, but it is now taking me twice as long to process payments as it did before. How come those IT guys never talk to us users first?"
- "I don't know about you, but I'm really getting sick and tired of dealing with the people in the human resources department. There's never anyone there to answer the phones, and they never return your calls."
- "I'm really getting irritated by the length of time that it's taking accounts payable to get me my expense reim-

bursements. It's been two months since I turned in my report, and I'm still waiting."

- "Do you believe that the sales department got those special tickets last week? I don't understand why those prima donnas always get rewarded and the rest of us don't get anything."

These are real quotes from real employees. If the comments had been just conversation at the water cooler, that's likely where they would have stayed. On the other hand, businesses that provide employees with an easy and safe way to share their questions, concerns and ideas with management have the opportunity to reduce or eliminate employee stress, misinformation and dissatisfaction. In fact, some water cooler insights can actually help improve the bottom line. The point is that when management demonstrates that employee feedback is genuinely valued, both retention and productivity show marked increases.

Giving Employees a Voice

Just about every major research study related to attracting and retaining the best and the brightest individuals concludes that giving employees a real voice is by

far the most effective way to motivate and cultivate them. Unfortunately, many executives aren't interested in opening communication channels, or they trust systems that simply don't work. For example, it's one thing to decree that a company has an "open door" policy, but it's an entirely different reality to get employees to believe that they can safely use it.

What management might be surprised to learn is that there are creative new ways to tap into that valuable water cooler talk. One of the most effective is to set up systems whereby employees send their candid thoughts, feelings and ideas to management via an independent company. These independent providers furnish the tools and consultation needed to make an employee empowerment program not only functional but, more importantly, credible and used. Services can include features such as employee feedback programs, compliance hotlines, pulse surveys, exit interviews and management broadcasts.

Promoting Employee Feedback

When using an outside service as a feedback portal, the process typically begins by promoting a toll-free number that employees can dial anytime and anyplace to provide feedback. Employees who decide to use the outsourced choice have their calls answered by either an automated system or a live person. If an automated system is used, employees record their comments and hang up. If a live person is employed, callers are led through a company-approved interview script. The employee's message is then transcribed or summarized and forwarded in a timely way to a company representative for evaluation and follow-up.

What's important about the process, and all but impossible to replicate internally, is that employees can choose to have their thoughts be completely anonymous.

In fact, that's the choice that two-thirds of users make, and that statistic, more than any other, suggests the level of discomfort that exists in most workplaces. By reducing this discomfort level, a company significantly increases the likelihood that it will actually hear about workplace irritants and conflicts and, thereby, be able to do something about them.

There are several innovative ways third-party systems can be designed, and, almost without exception, employees welcome them and tend to use them responsibly. As one unnamed employee so eloquently put it, "When a person treats a person like a kid, a person works like a kid. But when you treat him like a human, he'll work like a dog for you."

Nip It in the Bud

Management can look at this kind of feedback in two ways. On the one hand, water cooler chatter can be considered petty grumbling, which always goes on in the workplace. Companies that don't make a concerted and credible effort to learn and listen will never know what they're missing. Or worse yet, when they do find out, it will be much more costly to deal with the issues. On the other hand, by having access to this important information, organizations can evaluate and address concerns before they become overwhelming and destructive.



Peter W. Lilienthal is the president and founder of Minneapolis, Minn.-based In Touch, a company that designs and operates employee feedback systems.