As the manager of a busy department with too much to do and not enough people to do it, it’s easy to simply say no and walk away when a member of your staff suggests an idea for a new project, process improvement, or potential opportunity. The problem with this approach is that it sends the wrong message to the members of your staff. I’m not saying here that you should do every idea that your staff suggests, that would be impossible and, quite frankly, odds are that not all of the staff suggestions would be worth doing. What I am suggesting is that you do the following:

**Listen carefully to each suggestion.**
Who knows, it may be a really good idea and something that you would like to implement within your department.

**Discuss the rationale behind the suggestion.**
This discussion will allow you to not only gain an understanding of the issue at hand, but it will also give you insights as to how the employee assesses situations, defines problems, constructs action plans, and presents his/her business case. These insights into your staff member’s abilities
is valuable when trying to delegate tasks, provide training, give performance reviews, and deciding how to promote.

**Thank the employees for their initiative.**

Whether you use their idea or not, even whether you like it or not, thanking the employee for taking the time and caring enough to make the suggestion has many advantages, including:

1. You are letting the employee know that he/she is being listened to, taken seriously, and that his/her opinion and thoughts are important to you.
2. You are showing the employee that he/she has the potential to have a significant impact on how the department operates.
3. You are building loyalty from the employees toward you because of your willingness to listen to their ideas.
4. By encouraging the employees to continue thinking about new and innovative ideas. Who knows, even if this idea isn’t very good, his/her next idea may be fantastic.
5. You are helping the employee grow professionally by discussing topics other than their specific daily tasks.
6. You are illustrating by your actions to other members of your team that you are the kind of manager that listens to his/her staff.

**Provide honest and helpful feedback.**

Don’t glad hand your staff and tell them you like their ideas if you don’t. By your actions they will know that you really don’t like the idea and will feel lied to and patronized. If you don’t like the idea have an honest discussion with them as to why you don’t like it. This type of conversation has two primary advantages:

1. It becomes a learning moment for the employee as to why their suggestion cannot be implemented. This has the potential to improve the employee’s understanding of the topic and provide better ideas in the future. It also provides you the opportunity to help the employee grow professionally, which is your job as the manager.
2. When the employee does suggest a great idea and you say so, they will believe you because they know you are willing to tell them the truth when you don’t like it.
If you like the idea, follow up.

In the best of all possible worlds the employee’s suggestion makes good sense and it is something that you would like to implement within your department. If this is the case, don’t let the idea die on the vine unimplemented. Not only will this be a lost opportunity for you and your department, it will also be very discouraging to the employee that originally made the suggestion.

The primary advice and takeaways from today’s column is to know that:

- Being open to employee suggestions related to a new project, process improvement, or potential opportunity has many advantages for you as the department manager and for those on your team.
- Fostering an environment that facilitates employee suggestions can provide real value to the employee, you as the department manager, and your company in general.

Until next time, manage well, manage smart, and continue to grow.

Author Bio:

Eric P. Bloom, based in Ashland, MA, is the president and founder of Manager Mechanics LLC, a company specializing in Information Technology (IT) leadership development and the governing organization for the ITMLP© and ITMLE© certifications. He is also a nationally syndicated columnist, keynote speaker, and author of the award winning book “Manager Mechanics: Tips and Advice for First-Time Managers.” Contact him at eric@ManagerMechanics.com, follow him on Twitter at @EricPBloom, or visit www.ManagerMechanics.com.