



All businesses face challenges, but not all businesses have a strategy for turning challenges into profitable solutions.

From customer relations to communications to keeping up with market changes and technology, underlying problems may be more apparent to employees than to managers and leaders. Employees who complain about business problems are usually dedicated to the job, but may not know how to express their concerns clearly or offer solutions using an effective business approach.

Why should that matter when it's leadership's job to make decisions and implement business initiatives? It matters because whether they are behind the lines or face-to-face with customers, employees at all levels have an impact on the bottom line. To put it simply, profitability is tied to employee satisfaction. Encouraging employees to express their opinions and empowering them to champion the change they seek creates an inside advantage for their organization.

What can you do?

*Whether they are behind the lines or face-to-face with customers, employees at all levels have an impact on the bottom line.*

## 1 Understand your organization's business culture

People at the top of an organization often assume that people at the bottom don't think the way they do — understandable yet costly. Many lower-level employees have exciting ideas about how business should be conducted but are afraid to speak up. Others speak up, but their input doesn't reach decision makers because effective channels for this type of communication do not exist.

*Profitability is tied to employee satisfaction.*

Does your organization have a forum or method for conducting employee focus groups? Is a structure in place for allowing employee ownership of change initiatives? Do your employees feel safe offering their concerns and ideas with you, their manager, or a business decision maker?

You can help make change as smooth and profitable as possible by tapping into employees who have the knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm needed to make the changes work and to be role models for less change-hardy employees.

## 2 Encourage employees to identify problems

If your current business culture inhibits employee input, create a safe environment within your realm of influence. When employees know they can present their concerns to you without repercussions, they will come forward. It's human nature to want to be heard and to make a difference.

When they are comfortable coming to you, coach them to focus their complaint. Employees who are upset may start talking about the problem, then expand the topic because they are taking things personally. Help them identify one thing, in fifteen

words or less, that they can control or do something about. And ask them: "What do other people control, and how can I partner with them to find a solution?" Use these questions and initial conversations to help employees focus on the specific problem.

## 3 Get to the cause of the matter

Problem solving often fails because people don't identify the problem and its cause specifically enough. Help employees identify the root cause of a problem by asking general questions and working toward more exacting questions, including the who, what, when, where, why, and how. Ask questions you think they know the answers to as a way to confirm their perception; and ask how they think other people see the problem. Once they've nailed down the cause, ask them to define some alternative actions they and the organization can take to address the problem.

One alternative may be to do nothing, as some problems are too costly to resolve: It is more cost effective to live with the problem than pay to fix it. When employees understand why your organization can do nothing to change the situation, they are more willing to adjust their expectations and find other ways to channel their efforts. If the best solution is too costly, encourage employees to identify the second best solution and to explore its possibilities and implications.

## 4 Teach employees how to develop a business case

The key to creating a solution-oriented culture is to encourage employees to identify problems, identify solutions, and sell their ideas to you and the other decision makers in the organization. Essentially, you want them to develop business cases for the solutions they envision.

Follow this framework for creating a solid business case, as an individual or team effort, that you can share with your employees:

- Introduce the basic problem objectively

- State the cause of the problem
- Explain what the problem costs in terms of profit and customer and/or employee satisfaction
- Offer their solution
- Demonstrate how their solution will make things better, faster, or more cost effective
- State what the solution will cost and how it will affect the bottom line
- Provide appropriate details on how their solution will be implemented and monitored
- Define what resources and commitment the organization needs to provide
- Accept ownership of the solution and state how they will partner with others to ensure the cooperation of those who can help
- Present conservative expectations
- Define the process for measuring the success of their solution

*The key to creating a solution-oriented culture is to encourage employees to identify problems, identify solutions, and sell their ideas to you and the other decision makers in the organization.*

Coach your employees on making a formal or informal presentation appropriate to your business culture. PowerPoint or flip-chart presentations are usually satisfactory, but if they're asking decision makers to invest a lot of money, employees may need to offer significant research and examples of how other organizations have undertaken and reaped the benefits of similar initiatives. For example, if employees want an on-site daycare, they can interview the personnel

director of a similar-sized company with a daycare to gather comparable attendance and retention statistics.

While their business case must be objective, employees should present it with passion. To win the decision makers' confidence, employees must be sincere, feel strongly about their solution, and clearly communicate their feelings. Remember that sincerity trumps style in this situation. Many a great idea has never been presented because of fear of speaking in public. You are not evaluating how well someone speaks, you are looking for a good idea that will make the business more competitive.

Employees should ask the decision makers for their support and give them a call to action. If a decision can't be made at that time, employees should get a commitment for a subsequent meeting. If the decision is made to go ahead, then employees should ask for an implementation date.

## 5 Set the stage and give constructive feedback

Before the meeting, ask the decision makers to pay attention to the details of the presentation but to focus on the overall plan. Explain the importance of being supportive, even if they disagree with the presenter's point of view. Make sure they understand that negative criticism may seem threatening to other employees and destroy the culture you're trying to create.

After the meeting, give the employee or team feedback about the strengths you saw in the ideas they presented. Make suggestions for improvement, even if you didn't buy into the plan. If you see gaps in the information they provided or the action steps they recommended, ask them to further develop their ideas and try again.

## Solving problems in the future

Imagine the impact satisfied employees, who know they have the ability to effect change and the gain support of their leadership, can

have on your organization's bottom line. By using this process for creating a culture that encourages employees at all levels to champion their vision, you can turn your organization's business challenges into profitable solutions.

### DBR

Reprinted with the permission of Jim Dawson, managing partner of ADI Performance. ADI trains professionals in the successful strategies of leadership, communications, and management. Contact Jim at 770-640-0840 (US) or email [jrdawson@adiperformance.com](mailto:jrdawson@adiperformance.com).

The first step in encouraging your team members to express their opinions and champion change is understanding their natural tendencies. Drake P3 is an online assessment solution that reveals a person's communication styles, emotional intelligence, motivational needs, decision-making abilities, energy levels, and more. Backed with this profile information, managers can provide the guidance to build role models within the organization who turn challenges into solutions.

To find out how Drake P3 can help you, contact the Talent Management Solutions team:

**Africa: 2721 425 3300**  
[africa@drake.co.za](mailto:africa@drake.co.za)

**Australia: 613 9245 0245**  
[hrosolutions@au.drakeintl.com](mailto:hrosolutions@au.drakeintl.com)

**Canada: 416 216 1074**  
[solutions@na.drakeintl.com](mailto:solutions@na.drakeintl.com)

**Hong Kong: 852 2848 9288**  
[Drake@drake.com.hk](mailto:Drake@drake.com.hk)

**New Zealand: 0800 840 940**  
[solutions@nz.drakeintl.com](mailto:solutions@nz.drakeintl.com)

**Philippines: 632 753 2490**  
[weoutperform@drakeintl.co.uk](mailto:weoutperform@drakeintl.co.uk)

**Singapore: 65 6225 5809**  
[drake@sg.drakeintl.com](mailto:drake@sg.drakeintl.com)

**South Africa: 011 883 6800**  
[Solutions@drake.co.za](mailto:Solutions@drake.co.za)

**United Kingdom: 0800 111 4558**  
[solutions@drakeintl.co.uk](mailto:solutions@drakeintl.co.uk)