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Getting ideas from the frontline

Suggestion "schemes" include giving out crystal hand grenades as awards.

This week, FT.com (the *Financial Times* newspaper online) has been dusting off the notion of suggestion "schemes" (otherwise known as suggestion "programs"), saying: "In the 21st century the suggestion scheme is alive and well."

Today's ideas of engagement, coupled with ever increasing numbers of change initiatives, mean staff ideas are very welcome. Added to which, all organizations must innovate or die – and the boardroom is not the only preserve of great ideas.

Increase the prestige of suggestion schemes

Andy Szpekman, president, AHS Communications, and the Hub's [manager and leader communications](#) expert suggests commissioning a special gift for the person or group achieving the most notable results for the year.

"Present the gift at a significant year-end event," Szpekman says. "For instance, the Adams division of Warner-Lambert, where I once worked, would select a region or plant each year for a special award. We would commission a painting of the division mascot in a setting suggesting the winning group's location."

The mascot might appear beside, say, Big Ben if the UK had won. The division's president would announce the award and present the painting to the country manager at a year-end event, while touting the country's achievements. The country manager would later hang the painting in a prominent location.

Szpekman also suggests providing something memorable around an important emblem reflecting the organization's culture for basic suggestions, instead of a small cash award. "The award should be something that can be displayed in the recipient's workspace. Longtime Bank of America Chairman (and ex-Marine) Hugh McColl, for instance, used to give out crystal hand grenades as awards," he says.

Enhance suggestion scheme communication

Szpekman goes on to suggest establishing a protocol for managers making award presentations. "The event needn't be formal, but managers who present awards do need to follow guidelines on what to say and do to help make the awards special."

"Use any of the following communication tools to promote the scheme, provide updates and announce award recipients," Szpekman says.

- Leadership talking points to use during walk-arounds.
- Brochures describing the scheme and its purpose.
- Congratulations cards for award winners and thank you letters for submitters.
- Newsletter/intranet articles with updates and success stories.
- Posters and flyers promoting the scheme and its purpose.
- Website dedicated to the scheme.
- Video of award recipients showcasing their achievements.
- Broadcast voice mail messages from executives.
- Blast e-mails to announce winners, submission deadlines, updates.

Content might include:

- purpose of the scheme;
- submission process;
- types of achievements recognized; and
- how recognized achievements link to broader company goals.

"A few months after you roll out a new suggestion scheme, conduct an online survey or focus groups to test the scheme's effectiveness and see how you might improve it," Szpekman says.

Some example schemes

- **BAE Systems, Barrow-in-Furness:** non-executive employees receive a percentage of income from income-generating ideas
- **Identity and Passport Office:** 1,262 suggestions e-mailed last year
- **Milliken Industrials:** uses shop-floor meetings to generate suggestions
- **Boots pharmacy chain:** suggestions save the company around £500,000 a year

Have your say

Are suggestions schemes as dead as the dodo? Clearly not – and the recent emphasis on employee engagement will no doubt give them a further boost. Maybe the “suggestion scheme” has simply become “business as usual”.

What sort of “scheme” do you have in your organization? Who owns it – HR, the line, employee engagement? And what role does internal communication play?

Discuss these issues with other comms practitioners by joining the [Internal Comms Hub members' group](#) on the Communicators' Network.

Hub members, please [pose your questions to Andy Szpekman](#) now.