

Published by Carswell, a Thomson Reuters business

Try throwing the box out and thinking outside the door

Developing new and innovative products and services is critical for any business. But it's easier said than done. To be innovative, in far too many cases, business leaders utter one of the most cringe-inducing, overused and under-explained phrases: "We have to think outside the box."

Just because the phrase is tired and subject to overkill doesn't mean the concept isn't sound. But there's a way to take out-of-the-box thinking, well, outside of the box. It's called open-door innovation.

One of the easiest, cost-effective ways to be innovative is to get out of the office. Most bosses believe they can tell who their best employees are by keeping track of how much time they spend at their desk: The more time, the better the employee, according to Dave Kelley, founder of IDEO, a Palo Alto, Calif.-based design consultancy.

But the reality is quite different. Employees who venture outside of their workspace, and see what other companies, industries, cultures and groups are doing — yes, out there in the outside world — will be the most innovative.

Field trips aren't just for school kids

The great news about adopting open-door innovation is it picks up the energy level, and enthusiasm, within an organization. Humans are social creatures and, therefore, our brains are wired to meet people and learn about what they do. As a child, one of the best parts of school was going on field trips. As an adult, you share recipes with others. You try new restaurants. You travel. The result is learning — and pretty fast learning at that.

Why should that stop in a business context? There are numerous tools and tech-



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niques HR departments can adopt to bring fast-paced, fresh innovation to the organization.

Open houses: In Southern Ontario, a number of manufacturing facilities in non-competing industries regularly meet to tour each other's plants, to learn new techniques, layouts and processes. This benchmarking consortium has led to a number of process improvements and a wide range of new techniques.

Networking: With the rise of social networking and sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, the ability to spread knowledge has increased dramatically. Organizations including McCain Foods and Harley-Davidson regularly meet with other executives in non-formal networking groups, in addition to formal associations, to further increase the rate of knowledge sharing.

Friendly consulting: Constructive feedback tends to resonate when it comes from a friend. Via Rail, the *Globe and Mail* and others have partnered through McGill University in Montreal to rigorously analyse each other and provide honest, candid feedback at a fraction of the cost of a formal consultant.

Job shifting: Moving people around can broaden their scope and approach to their respective roles. In the United States, Southwest Airlines and a number of major banks have been very successful with this technique. Samsung takes this concept further by regularly sending top designers and engineers from Korea to Italy or the U.S. to work with artists or in galleries.

Field trips: One of the easiest ways to get out and about is to take groups of employees on field trips. In many cases, simply picking up the phone and contacting another company of interest and asking if you can set up a time to visit its offices or plant is all it takes. This is precisely what Mercedes-Benz USA does within its management training curriculum. And if calling on another organization is too daunting a task, websites such as PlantTourUSA.com list every available business-related tour across the U.S., broken down by state.

In most cases, each of these tools is relatively low cost and simple for an HR team to implement across an organization, giving employees first-hand exposure to new ideas.

Show employees the door

The job for business leaders is to be the CDO — chief door opener. By encouraging employees (and yourself) to get out of the office, you can help motivate, recognize, reward and ultimately retain them. In addition, by putting your own social network, or access to other organizations, to work, you should plan to set up as many visits to your own facility as possible.

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