

The Influential Employee

(How to Make a Difference When You're Not the Boss)

by Stephanie Bond

You're an industrious employee frustrated with the way your store is being operated. You see opportunities for improvement, but you don't know how to approach the manager/owner, or if the person would even welcome your suggestions—after all, you don't want to come across as patronizing and perhaps jeopardize your job. What should you do?

Get to know your boss. If you don't know the boss very well, make an effort to strike up a conversation to get a feel for how the two of you mesh so you can determine the boss's managing style—hands off? Trusting? Preoccupied? It might also be helpful to ask other employees for their take on the boss's managing style—but know that those answers might be biased and you should always trust your own perception.

Familiarize yourself with company policy. If you work for a chain bookstore, the day-to-day operations might be governed by company-wide policy. Study the policy manual to determine if the changes you'd like to suggest would even be feasible.

Come up with solutions. It's never a good policy to complain unless you have a suggestion for a solution—make sure your recommendations are not simply that things should change, but what the change should be and how it can be implemented.

Recruit support from fellow employees. It's always a good idea, especially if you're a new employee, to bounce your ideas off other employees, if only to determine if something similar has been tried in the past. Sharing will also help you gauge whether your idea has wide appeal. (Be careful here—you don't want to start an employee revolt over a trivial issue.)

Know how the implementation of your idea will improve the bottom line. Else, why would a boss be interested? You were probably drawn to work with books simply because you love to read, but the boss has to worry about making payroll. Don't waste his/her time with frivolous ideas that would be fun but would have little or no impact on sales.

Prioritize your suggestions. In the beginning, you might want to suggest one or two small changes to see how the changes play out before you suggest other, more comprehensive changes.

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Put your ideas in writing. Be organized and brief. Make sure the tone of your memo isn't superior but is instead sincere and professional. If you have experience implementing an idea, say so. What was the impetus for your recommendation? (Customers requesting a certain product, for instance.)

Offer to take the lead. Most bosses are open to employee suggestions, but balk at the idea of having to manage the project or change themselves. Offering to take the lead on implementing the project will increase its chance of being adopted.

Time your delivery. Many a good idea has been turned down simply due to bad timing. Don't present your memo while the boss is in the throes of ordering for the holiday sales season, or wrestling with a sticky personnel issue, for instance. (Unless your suggestions directly affect the problem currently facing your boss.)

Expect resistance. Change doesn't come about easily. Expect some resistance, or perhaps even all-out rejection. If your idea is shot down, retreat and regroup. Who knows—your memo might raise the boss's awareness of a problem, and six months later what seemed like a bad idea is now a brilliant solution.

Follow through. If your idea is green-lighted, don't drop the ball, even if interest wanes. This is the phase where most good ideas fail—after the momentum ends. Stay motivated—review your initial recommendation memo to see if the project has strayed, and determine if tweaks need to be made to stay on track. Committing to progress reports, even if it's in the form of a casual e-mail message, is a good idea to help remain focused.

If the working atmosphere and morale is suffering in your bookstore, be proactive about suggesting changes for improvement. After all, your industriousness might result in more than just making the workplace more enjoyable—you could be saving the business...and your job!

~SBond

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