Idea sharing: Be sensitive about rejection

Speaking up in front of a supervisor can be stressful—but it doesn't have to be, according to new research from a Rice University psychologist. How a leader responds to employee suggestions can impact whether the employee opens up in the future.

Danielle King, an assistant professor of psychology at Rice, is the lead author of "Voice Resilience: Fostering Future Voice After Non-Endorsement of Suggestions," which will appear in an upcoming special issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. The paper explains how leaders can use language that encourages workers to offer more ideas in the future, even if their suggestions are not implemented.

After conducting two studies, King found that people who speak up at work only to have their ideas rejected by supervisors will nonetheless offer more suggestions later if their bosses respond properly.

"Given that many employee ideas for change cannot be endorsed, our results highlight the practical importance of providing sensitive explanations for why employee suggestions cannot be embraced," she said. "Specifically, it is critically important for leaders to exhibit sensitivity in their communication with employees."

The first study, with 197 participants, included a survey asking workers to describe a time when they gave their supervisor a suggestion that was rejected. They also answered questions about the adequacy of their leader's explanation, how the experience made them feel and how likely they were to speak up in the future.

The second study, including 223 students, involved two 30-minute online surveys. In this experimental study, students worked as interns for a marketing firm that was developing advertisements for businesses frequented by other students.

Students who provided suggestions about the marketing materials received one of four responses, all of which indicated their boss didn't agree with their advice. Those four responses covered a range of answers, from sensitive and well explained to insensitive and poorly explained. The students then had a second chance to offer suggestions on different material.

King, whose future research will explore other forms of resilience at work, hopes this study will encourage more sensitive communication between leaders and employees.

Before you pitch that idea…

No idea lives or dies according to its own virtues. Here are some factors to consider before pitching an idea to someone in your organization:

The organization's structure for dealing with ideas. In many companies founded by entrepreneurs, people at all levels are openly encouraged to present ideas to the top brass. Many such firms have idea competitions, brainstorming meetings, suggestion boxes and other mechanisms intended to cut the time it takes for top managers to learn about an idea from the ranks. In other companies, there's a rigid hierarchy that discourages lower-level workers from suggesting new ideas.

The target person's history. Look at the track record of the person to whom you are pitching your idea. Has he or she been responsible for innovations or new programs? If so, were those programs successful? Remember that risk-intolerant people exist in even the most entrepreneurial organizations and, conversely, that people who love new ideas do hold jobs with extremely conservative firms. The key is to identify people who are not afraid of risk and to be sure they are the ones who will hear your ideas. This may mean keeping an idea on hold until a suitable opportunity arises to present it.

The timing. This is a "make or break" factor. No idea is so wonderful that it will be approved if it is presented at the wrong time. A company in the midst of a cash flow crunch will not be open to a new product idea, however worthwhile. An executive who's just lost two key staffers will hardly be interested in what she perceives as a "peripheral issue" until the staffing situation is resolved.

The organization's history of accepting new ideas. If your idea pertains to some new activity for your company, you must take time to analyze your company's adventurousness and its history of success or failure with new ideas. Suppose you decide that you are working for a company that is not adventurous enough to implement your ideas and plans? Remember that things do change, even in stodgy organizations. The arrival of a new person in upper management or the acquisition of another company can suddenly warm the organizational climate to new ideas.

Ideally, your target will see something of herself reflected in your idea. Position an idea well enough, and your audience may feel as though he or she is already part of the process. That's your goal.