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Sometimes we all get in ruts (also known as shallow graves). Here are some ideas I recently ran across that should help you and your team(s) jump out of that rut. I hope you find these ideas valuable.

Empowering team members to drive productivity

by Jeff Wuorio

Every business - and, for that matter, every employee - wants to be as productive as possible. Happily, there's a growing array of tools and strategies that can help your business achieve that end. They take the old cliché "work smarter, not harder" and transform it into action.

Want to boost your team's productivity? Here are six ideas to consider:

- 1. Increase your tolerance for risk.** That doesn't mean signing up for midnight bungee jumping or rodeo clown training. Rather, broaden your thinking about innovative ideas and programs for your business. It might include offering alternative work schedules, implementing new problem solving techniques, or getting input from outside consultants. "Tolerance for risk should be a commitment that starts at the top of an organization and moves down from there," says Ed Reilly, president and CEO of the American Management Association. "That can mean innovation in all sorts of ways."
- 2. Encourage creativity.** By exploring fresh, collaborative approaches to business tasks, you can break out of old patterns and habits. In doing so, you also accept a certain degree of failure. Scary as it may sound to some, tolerating mistakes is an essential part of engaging employees. "Encourage your people to think and talk about broad issues, not merely how they're going to make their quarterly numbers," says Reilly. "Have them think creatively in terms of processes, logistics, and systems and ways they can deal with customers more effectively."
- 3. Ask, don't tell.** Talking about the importance of creativity is one thing, but coming up with practical ways to incorporate it is another. Jerald Jellison, professor of psychology at the University of Southern California and author of "Managing the Dynamics of Change," has a simple but effective strategy called "Ask, Don't Tell." Simply ask your employees what they think of a particular situation or problem. Then, give them sufficient time to answer without offering your input.

The process will boost productivity on two levels. "First, you get new and better ideas that have nothing to do with your own thinking-ideas that can help people be more productive," says Jellison. "But you also get commitment. If someone offers an idea, they're going to work very hard to show that their idea is right."

- 4. Offer flexible work arrangements.** Another effective strategy that can boost productivity is offering a variety of work arrangements. This can include flextime (employees choose when they begin and finish their workday), job sharing (two or more employees share one job's overall responsibilities),

telecommuting, and other programs. The benefits are two-fold: Employees are empowered to arrange their workday in the way that works best for them, and management is able to demonstrate its commitment to keeping people as happy and engaged as possible.

5. **Want to brainstorm? Do it right.** Brainstorming is another way to bolster team productivity. However, there's more to it than simply scheduling a meeting. Consider these suggestions for your next brainstorming session:
 - Be smart about scheduling. Don't schedule brainstorming sessions at the end of other meetings when participants may be tired and preoccupied. Schedule them separately so that everyone is fresh and ready to participate.
 - Ask people to prepare. Don't have participants show up for brainstorming sessions with a blank slate. Before the meeting, communicate the goal of the session and ask employees to bring some ideas with them.
 - Ask for follow-up suggestions. Have participants identify important points from the session - and, from there, suggest practical ways those points might be implemented.
6. **Make brainstorming a way of life.** Encourage your employees to think creatively on a daily basis. If you create an atmosphere of creativity, team members will be more likely to brainstorm during the workday and even on their own time.

"Develop a culture of curiosity," says Reilly. "And, when you do have a brainstorming meeting, remind everyone this shouldn't be the only time this is happening."

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