

8 Ways to Feed a Need and Stifle a Fear to Innovate from the Middle

by Ann Tardy / ann@lifemoxie.com / 1.855.Ms.Moxie (1.855.676.6943) / www.lifemoxie.com

Flight Attendant vs. Consultant

“They paid some consultant millions of dollars to figure out how to load this plane. **They should have just asked me. I’ve been a flight attendant for 22 years.**” I overheard this on a recent flight when the boarding process caused a traffic jam of people.

Office Managers vs. Corporate Headquarters

“They said they wanted to ‘empower us’ to come up with our own ideas for developing our agents, and so we did. We actually got excited about the opportunity to do something different, but when we submitted our proposals to them, they said, ‘No, we changed our mind. You must do it our way.’ **Even though we work side-by-side with our agents every day, they didn’t even consider any of our great ideas.**” An incensed and frustrated manager of an insurance office with over 100 agents recently shared these sentiments with me.

Manager vs. President

“They hired me because of my experience with end user customers and yet they didn’t even ask me to weigh in on the launch of a new project that directly impacts those customers. And when I offered a differing viewpoint, they silenced me. **And when I questioned an inconsistency, they said, ‘Are you purposely trying to point out our mistake?’** So maddening!”

Managers – A Title or a Missed Opportunity?

Each of your managers has a title and holds a position, but each one is also your greatest opportunity. They’re the pulse of your organization. **Each one holds a wealth of insight and knowledge about your company – your products/services, people, operations, and customers – that they are dying to share.**

Influencing Tenets

Everyone – including you, me, your managers – is influenced by fears and needs. As an example, we are influenced by a need to make a difference which influences us to contribute. Conversely, we are influenced by a fear of rejection which influences us to look to our herd to determine if they are going to reject us for those contributions. **These influences regularly clash.**

Innovating from the Middle

When you look to the middle of your organization for ideas, everyone prospers. You get fresh ideas and perspectives, and the people in the middle – your managers – are influenced to contribute those ideas. **By asking people to contribute, you are diluting their fear of rejection and feeding their need to make a difference.** If, however, you don’t ask, like the flight attendant was not asked, you are doing the opposite – feeding their fear and squelching their need to make a difference.

Method's Method to Tap the Middle

Method, a \$100 million soapmaker based in San Francisco, is notorious for their eccentric culture, including flash mobs and random dance parties in the office. To create such a culture, leaders at Method frequently look to the people in the culture to create the culture. In fact, job candidates are asked to demonstrate how they plan to keep Method “weird.” **By asking people to make a difference with the “weird” ideas, Method’s leaders also mute those same people’s fear of rejection for actually suggesting “weird” ideas. It’s brilliant!**

8 Ways You Can Ignite the Middle

Here are 8 ideas for feeding people’s need to make a difference while also stifling their fear of rejection.

- **Assign someone to be the devil’s advocate in each meeting.** No matter what is said, invite this person to pitch the opposite position.
- **Enlist focus groups.** Engage in internal research by asking people to voice their opinion without fear of repercussion.
- **Create task forces.** Invite people from different departments to join a task force to solve a particular problem or address a certain issue.
- **Use brainwriting instead of brainstorming.** This method allows for generating ideas without the influences of groupthink.
- **Launch a mentoring program.** Invite people to make a difference by contributing to the success of their colleagues.
- **Be an undercover boss.** Follow in the footsteps of the reality TV show of the same name and discover what really goes on when they aren’t afraid of you.
- **Nominate one person to help you explore an opportunity.** Their perspective will be enlightening while they will relish the opportunity to contribute without being rejected for it.
- **Ask people what they love about their job.** Their answer will reveal how they feel they make a difference. Allow them to continue doing just that.