Practice Business Writing

Inquire: Where to Start with Your Big Ideas

Overview

When you have a big idea and know it will improve your workplace, what do you do? How do you prove that the idea you brought forward is actually working? This lesson will help you answer these questions.

First, you will learn where to begin when you have a big idea. You will then learn about what drives decision making, so you can best take advantage of it. Next, you will learn what to do after your ideas are adopted. Finally, you will learn about the ethical considerations to keep in mind when coming up with business proposals and reports.

Big Question: How do you convince your boss to listen when you have an idea on how to improve your workplace?

Watch: Denise’s Recognition Board

Denise has noticed a lack of positivity in her workplace. Particularly, she feels like there is not a way for her to recognize her coworkers’ good work. Denise has the idea of creating an anonymous board where any member of her workplace can recognize another member’s good work. She drafts a professional email to her supervisor briefly explaining her idea and why she wants to do it. Her supervisor responds via email and asks Denise to build a business proposal that fleshes out all the details of her idea. Her supervisor says that she will present this business proposal in two weeks at the next board meeting.

Denise works diligently, determining all the details of the recognition board. Denise surveys the members of the company to measure morale, and includes these findings in her business proposal. She decides that every department will have one, and that the notes put on the boards will be read at department meetings. Additionally, all department heads can choose to add any extra recognition they want with board notes. For a visual aid, Denise builds an example of what the board might look like. She presents this with her business proposal at the board meeting, and the board loves it! Denise was sure to include studies about how increased morale can increase productivity in an organization.

After the meeting, Denise is given the green light to begin distributing the recognition boards around the organization. An email is sent out to every member of the organization explaining what these boards are and how to use them.

After a few months of the recognition boards being used, Denise works on writing up a business report. She surveys random members of the company to measure morale and efficiency and compares those
findings with her original survey. She includes all of this data in her business report and she is happy to announce that the recognition boards have increased both morale and efficiency!

Denise used many techniques that you have learned in this module; can you identify each of them?

Read: Presenting Your Ideas

Overview

This module has taught you about topics, emails, reports, and proposals. However, these subjects can all seem a bit abstract and unrelated. This lesson will explain how they work together and provide some things to consider when presenting a report or proposal.

The Beginning of a Proposal

Occasionally at work your boss might ask you to present a report about something your team has done. However, this doesn't happen in isolation. Somewhere along the line you emailed your boss about something your team was working on or proposed the idea in the first place. Before you could send that email or make a proposal, you had a topic in mind that you wanted to work on.

All of these concepts might seem unrelated but there is actually a very clear chain: you come up with an idea, and you email your boss about that idea. They ask you to put together a proposal so they can evaluate the idea and then, once your idea is implemented, you need to write a report to show if it was successful.

Being able to come up with ideas to improve your workplace is a valuable asset to an employer. An even larger asset is knowing how to present those ideas in a clear and easily understood manner. This module has provided you with some of the tools you need to begin the process. This lesson will help solidify those concepts into something practical.

What Drives Decisions?

You should consider two things when you think of an idea that you want to convince your boss to adapt. If your idea is going to be successful it needs to either increase productivity, decrease costs, or preferably do both. These two things are among the most persuasive notions you can bring forward when presenting your idea. You should be able to clearly explain how your idea is going to save time or money. However, it isn’t enough to simply say that an idea will save time and money; you need to be able to prove why it will do as you say. You might need to explain how an idea has saved money at other workplaces or reference conversations with other employees who agree it will save time. Whatever approach you use, so long as it proves efficiency improvements or cost reductions, you will be in good shape.

What Comes Next?

It isn’t enough to say your proposal has saved time or money without backing it up. Once your idea has been implemented, you need to track the results in order to prove its successes. Companies are constantly evaluating themselves to see if the processes they use are working, so you want to be able to prove that your idea does in fact work.

After the initial implementation of your idea, you need to be able to present a report that shows how well it has worked. As a result, you need to think about how you will track data before your idea is even
implemented. Does that mean you will need some cost comparison data? Or maybe you will need an hours log maintained by other employees. Whatever you plan to do, you need to think about it early and improve it often so that you get the best results for the idea you are pioneering.

Ethical Considerations

There are some things to keep in mind when putting together your presentations, be it a proposal or a report. The most important ethical obligation to keep in mind is to always be honest when presenting information. Data and statistics can easily be manipulated to say whatever you want, but you should always strive to present your report in an accurate way. Don’t make up data to show your idea is producing results it is not producing. Similarly, don’t make up data to say a recommendation will do better than it has done in other places. Always represent the data fairly, honestly, and as it was intended.

Keep in mind that the recommendations you propose should be done to help the company or your team. Don’t propose an idea just because it will look good for you or make your life easier. Strive to make your environment better and it will reflect well on you. Looking out just for yourself is not something you should attempt.

Reflect Poll: Ideas?

Do you have any ideas in your workplace that you could write a proposal for?

- Yes, I have lots of ideas!
- No, there’s really nothing I can think of.

Expand: Writing a Proposal

Overview

There are very specific steps you should follow when writing a business proposal. This section will walk you through these steps.

Step One: Identify a Problem

The first step is identifying a problem. At work there may be a problem where a specific department is supported more easily than other departments. You need to be able to explain why they get supported; maybe they need more people or require a more efficient process. You also need to be able to explain why the issue you identify is actually a problem. If it is affecting work productivity or causing stress to the people involved, you need to be able to articulate that.

Identifying problems requires you to be aware of the activities happening around you, or be mindful. When you are mindful you can point things out that aren’t working as well as they should. Additionally, being mindful allows you to have some empathy toward others who are in a problematic situation. When you understand what problems you or a group are facing — and can explain why those problems matter — it is easier to begin the process of identifying solutions.

Step Two: Identify Solutions

After you identify a problem, it is time to start identifying ways that problem can be solved. Problems seldom have just one solution. As the old saying goes, sometimes you can go over something, or through
something, or under something. Not all solutions will work every time. In this step, you need to brainstorm solutions and try to gauge how these solutions will fix your problem.

Start this step with a clean sheet of paper. In the middle of the page, write your problem and a brief explanation — just one or two sentences — of the problem’s causes. Then start writing your ideas to fix it. Some ideas will connect to the original problem. Some ideas will connect to your solutions. Some ideas will connect to each other. Let it flow organically to try to come to the best solution possible.

For example, imagine your problem is a backlog in product production. You identify the cause of the problem: there are not enough people approving draft ideas of the product so they can start being made. You could try to fix this problem in several ways. Maybe you suggest hiring more people to approve drafts. Maybe you think the draft approval process should be changed in some way. Maybe you need to do both. No idea is too crazy at this point; getting them onto the paper is what is important.

Step Three: Write a Proposal

The final step is figuring out which idea on the brainmap you like the best and actually writing the proposal. You should include an introduction that has your thesis, a brief introduction of your problem, and a brief summary of your solution. These explanations should just be one sentence each. The thesis might be, “Production can do a better job of approving drafts.” Explaining the problem would require you to say something like, “Production keeps getting backed up on the approval process, slowing down other departments, and hurting our overall profit on the project.” Finally, your solution should read something like, “By changing our draft process we can make it easier to approve products and get the whole process moving faster.”

Following the introduction, you need to write the body: a detailed explanation of the problem, a detailed explanation of your solution, and a detailed explanation of how your solution would be implemented. After writing these sections, you need a conclusion that summarizes your proposal, including the problem, solution, and implementation. End your proposal by restating your thesis to remind your audience what you want to accomplish in the first place by making such a change.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

An article explaining the ins and outs of writing business proposals
  ● Link to resource: https://www.inc.com/encyclopedia/business-proposals.html

A video outlining the detailed steps in writing a project proposal, which we call business proposals in this lesson
  ● Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsGBuu88WE0

A video discussing the details of a business report
  ● Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8uF1EoIneE

Lesson Glossary

mindful: being aware of the activities happening around you
thesis: the central point of your presentation
Check Your Knowledge

1. You should only use data honestly in your proposals.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Tracking results is vital when implementing the content of a business proposal.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Saved time and money are the two biggest considerations in deciding whether a business will embrace a change.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. A  2. A  3. A

Citations

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