# Let Your Employees Be CEOs for a Day to Harness Their Hidden Power



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We will soon be launching what is likely to become a multimillion-dollar-a-month new app. The impetus for the idea came from our user acquisition (UA) and sales team leaders after they had identified the potential for a new opportunity in the market that I, as CEO, could not see. They had an idea to expand our existing app to focus on a growing opportunity but after talking about it, we agreed it could grow faster and larger as a standalone app.

This decision exemplifies the power of integrating diverse perspectives within the company to forge a superior strategic direction. It also shows how actively listening to and valuing

employee ideas can be a driving force for innovation and growth.

Making the most of this opportunity is a two-part process for leaders. Firstly, they have to prove they truly care about people's opinions. Secondly, they need to give employees enough information about how the business actually works from a strategic perspective so they are only bringing forward the best and most actionable ideas. If we do not get the second part right, people will be unhappy because they will feel their suggestions for improvement and growth are constantly being rejected.

Fortunately, we have tools to help them get into that strategic mindset and uncover their unique insights.

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## Putting on the CEO hat

Generating bigger strategic ideas requires a deep understanding of the company's goals. Currently, everyone in our company is familiar with our monthly EBITDA target. While each company has its unique objectives, we have discovered that offering employees a perspective from the CEO's seat encourages them to consider the larger strategic elements at play.

At our upcoming in-person conference in Las Vegas this January, we will engage various groups in a thought experiment: What would they prioritize if they were the CEO? We are already preparing folks across finance, product management and HR among others, prompting them to develop their best ideas for their respective groups. We are asking them what resources they lack and what they need to expand their teams. Our goal is to elicit unconstrained ideas, leading to discussions about how they contribute to the

company’s long-term growth goals. Once we have quantified their potential impact and cost, we can then estimate the long-term impact of these ideas.

While we cannot implement every suggestion, determining the most feasible and impactful ideas is crucial. Keeping the door open for team leaders to present their ideas, coupled with a formal process for ideas submission like this one, is invaluable for leaders. However, educating employees on their role within the broader business context can help ensure these structures are truly effective.

## Establishing a foundation for innovation

We recently hired a new head of onboarding and employee education to guide people to understand our whole business model. It is too complicated to communicate in just a two-day training session, so instead we are creating videos and training content and posting them on our wiki. We also present them at our monthly online meetings to help our teams see why “metrics matter.” These short videos lay out our entire business model one metric at a time and are entertaining enough and short enough that people will go back and watch them later when needed.

The other focus of the training is to give people a big, long roadmap of where we are heading. When ideas do come up, we can show people where they might fit in with the other initiatives we are working on. That way, our employees know they are not being ignored; it just might not be the best time to start on their idea. Being transparent about how we prioritize ideas shows we are serious about empowering our employees while tempering expectations.

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## How leaders can prioritize ideas

Unusable ideas are not usually bad, just impractical from a business standpoint. For instance, the HR department might ask for developers to build an automated solution for burdensome manual processes. As leaders, we might have to tell them they are paid to perform those actions because they are cheaper than having developers build a solution. Especially when building a company, an expensive solution that improves efficiency by 4% is not as valuable in the short run as a new growth project that could double the business at half the cost.

At the same time, leaders cannot ignore teams. Our customer support team had been asking for efficiency tools for six years. As frustrations grew, I decided to direct investment into developing administrative tools. Purely from a growth perspective, this may not have been the best move, but I knew it was important for the team and became more than just a matter of cents.

We also strive to give people access to the right information so they can model their ideas and build projections on how they will impact the company before they even bring them to our attention. Conversations with innovative employees become so much easier when they see why we are going to prioritize a $20 million idea over their $50,000 idea. By establishing this transparency and a culture free from judgment, leaders help ensure people will keep generating and testing their ideas.

## Mutual trust – the key to good ideas

When it comes to employee-driven innovation, the perfect balance is executive teams trusting their employees to come up with great ideas – and employees trusting leaders will take

the time and effort to truly consider them. It *is* hard: People pitch an idea and might not hear back for months, which can disenfranchise them from doing it again. But if we educate people on how the company works and its larger objectives, they will have faith that the executive team is earnestly trying to move the organization forward. Then, as people see their best ideas get implemented, it creates a virtuous cycle: They will be motivated to continue to think more strategically and leaders will be able to harness their insights for the benefit of the whole company.

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