We Don’t Pay You to Think!

How those six words changed my approach to management forever.

October 20, 2020 4 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

Recently, my assistant Dana made a couple suggestions to me. Afterwards, she asked if I minded her giving these suggestions. I immediately said that not only did I not mind her ideas, I actually wanted her to share them with me. I then told her the following story about an experience I had many years ago.

When I was 21 years old, I was finishing up my bachelor’s degree in California. I had scholarships to help, but I still needed to work a job to pay for my living expenses. I found a good-paying position working for a large chain grocery store stocking shelves from midnight until 7 a.m. four days a week. Ugh. That was brutal. The night crew had some serious quotas for boxes that had to go up on the shelves each and every night. While it might not sound very hard, the truth is that it was back-breaking work and one of the most physical jobs I ever had. On some days, I would work all night, go home to get a shower and then go straight to classes at 9 a.m.

Even then, I believed that sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do to get to do what you want to do. Early on, I knew one thing for certain, and that was that I did not want to work at a grocery store stocking shelves (at any hour of the day) for a career. I came to that realization because of one conversation that I had soon after I started my employment

One morning as I was coming off a break, I suggested to the

assistant manager that I help move the many pallets of boxes that had to be taken by dolly to every aisle in the store. It was a small suggestion, but I thought it might help. That's when the assistant manager gave me a "life lesson" that I would take with me for the rest of my career. He said,"Ivan, we don't pay you to think! We pay you to get lots of boxes on lots of shelves every single night. Now get back to work."

Related: 6 Tips on How to Be a Leader

I remember so vividly standing there and thinking, "Someday, I'm going to own my own business, and I promise that I will never, ever, say that to anyone who ever works for me. Ever." In fact, I decided I would tell them the opposite: "I pay you to think!" And that's because I want ideas. I want input. I want engagement.

I kept track of that assistant manager for about 10 years after I left the company. At that point, he had been promoted to "Main Shift Assistant Manager," and I was well on my way to building a global enterprise that now has operations in more tha 70 countries. And while I have no idea where he is today, if I ever met him again, I would tell him that I appreciated his admonishment, because it cemented my beliefs about accepting input from others.

Not all employee ideas will be gems, but listening shows you care about them and their ideas. It also encourages engagement and possibly even a certain amount of loyalty when an employee feels that their input matters. I may not have applied this perfectly over the years, but it is something that I have truly strived for.

Related: 4 Crisis-Proofing Lessons for Small Business Owners

I believe that "paying people to think" is exactly what entrepreneurs and managers should always be willing to do. Sometimes we get our life lessons from people who give us great advice, and sometimes we get our life lessons from

people who give us horrible advice. By applying a little discernment, they can both be a gift. His certainly was for me. And I did my best to never, ever follow it.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/357747