

Input all around

HOW TO GET BETTER IDEAS

Interviewed by BRIAN HORN

Bill Schrom learned very quickly that anyone in a company could have a good suggestion.

"Myself, my COO and CFO, we worked for a much larger company in the past, but we all worked out in smaller field operations," he says. "So, we understand that when you are this poor guy just trying to get a job done and all you need is this little thing done for you that ... if you do it, it'll make that person more efficient."



Schrom hasn't forgotten that lesson, even though he is CEO of Geotrace Technologies Inc., a reservoir services company that posted \$58.4 million in 2008 revenue.

"Our backgrounds have made us very open to thoughts from the guy on the line who is actually performing the work," he says.

Smart Business spoke with Schrom about how to get the most out of your employees and their ideas regardless of their position in the company.

Listen to employees. We have an open-door policy — myself, my COO, my CFO, we have our doors open. We don't have a secretary brigade blocking people or anything like that. People can come in and voice their opinions, which you've got to be cognizant of.

If you want to have a policy where people believe that you are listening, then you've got to act like you are listening. You've got to be willing to not just say, 'Well, that won't work.' Say, 'OK, let's think about that. What about this? What about that?' You've got to have a reasonable amount of discourse with people, and it kind of goes beyond just being open to your own employees.

You've got to be open with your customers and listen to what they're saying because a lot of times they're trying to say, 'Guys, this is what we really need. No matter what you're pushing and trying to sell, this is what I need.'

The other place we get some good feedback is often vendors. (They say), 'We see you guys are trying to do this. If you want to do it faster, have you thought about doing it like this?' What I try to get everyone to do is not say, 'Oh, no, no, you aren't part of this process.' I'd rather say, 'Let's get your ideas and let's hear it.' Because those are often people that I would consider to be out of the box that have a different perspective and a different view.

Choose the best ideas. (You) look at the commercial applicability of it. Then, it may be an idea that may not look profitable on the surface, but is there a way by, if you can say, 'Is there a market for this? Now, how do I make money with it?' So first, you've got to have some level of demand for it.

People come all the time with ideas, but if nobody's out there willing to buy them, you're wasting their time. If somebody is willing to buy them, then you've got to start saying, 'How can I make money with it?'

First, talk to the people who are interested, in terms of your clients. Often, you'll find that somebody who sees a technology that will solve a problem for them may be willing to pay a little bit more for you to apply that technology in their case.

(Second,) I've surrounded myself here with very good people who understand the intricacies of the science and can say, 'Yes, Bill, we can do this and do it in this kind of time frame.'

Engage employees. When we have a new technology,

I always try to engage people, talk to them, give them the opportunity to give me their thoughts. We've had a number of times when a great suggestion has come from just a routine guy who's just trying to do his job. I'll walk in to somebody's office, and they'll be struggling with something, and they say, 'Gosh, if I had two terminals in here, I could see this data better and do this better.' We usually respond to that kind of stuff. Most people have multiple terminals on their desk. It's not because I decided that. It's because they said, 'I could do my job more efficiently if I had it.'

Stay positive. There's a few people here who see me in a pretty bad mood at times. But, generally, if I am out walking the halls, I'm upbeat

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we'll get people down into a big conference room and go over, 'Here's what we're doing and here's why we are doing it. This is the company strategy on this point.' We do things called 'lunch and learns' with the employees where (we say), 'We're going to start running this process. Now you come in and we're going explain it to you.' We serve them a lunch so they kind of get comfortable with it.

We do a number of events with employees. Last year, we had a few great quarters, and we took everybody to a baseball game — so a lot of the interactions. I don't sit in my office. I'm not a guy who sits in his office all the time. I like to wander the halls and see what is going on.

and positive and willing to talk to somebody. I guess I've got a good memory in terms of people's names, spouses' names or children's names. So, it's nice that you know a little bit about them.

We do a number of employee events and you get to know the people. I'm sure at some stage, if we become a \$200 million company, it will be tough to know. But when I go to our offices overseas, I spend some time, every visit, walking around, sitting down with people trying to understand what they are doing and how they feel about the company and telling them what the company is doing and telling them about, 'Here is where we are trying to go. Here's what we are doing, and here is why.' <<

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