Innovation is important due to the fact that it can generate ideas that allow your feed and grain business to just get better. Maybe getting better is more efficient — use less labor or electricity; get more productivity out of your equipment. Maybe getting better means more growth — increasing sales; increasing customer satisfaction. Maybe getting better means a better work environment, improved employee morale, a safer facility. Getting better is about things that can ultimately increase your bottom line. Often we think of innovation as being someone else’s responsibility. However, as we hope to outline in this column, creating the right environment for continuous innovation can be fun and rewarding. And, from our view, getting better usually means doing it differently!

**Practical ideas for cultivating a culture of innovation/continuous improvement**

### Ask the BIG Question

Scott Ginsberg claims that every creative business idea begins with a question. He is an interesting fellow who asked himself the question (after attending a seminar), “What if I wore a name tag all day, every day, for the rest of my life?” Five years, two published books, 80+ published articles and several hundred speeches later he is still wearing his name tag. The point he makes is that sometimes you can create something out of nothing by asking BIG questions. In Ginsberg’s case — he has become a sought after expert on networking, communication and first impressions (check out http://www.hel-komynameisscott.com).

This idea of question-based creativity has evolved through centuries of study from around the world. “One who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; one who does not ask a question remains a fool forever,” says an ancient Chinese proverb. And Voltaire is famous for his words, “Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.”

So what sort of big questions can we ask in the feed and grain business? Many of these will have to be posed by you or your employees. However, here are a couple to get your creative juices flowing:

- What are the three dumbest things we do in our business? (See further discussion of this below)
- How can we fix these?

How and why things are done.

Regardless of industry, there are no rules, no laws of physics, utilities, or biology that say any particular way of doing things is right or wrong. If you could change one thing in your area to make us better, what would it be?

**Cultivating a “Habit” of Innovation**

Jim Canterucci, an adviser and professional speaker on the subjects of change and innovation, advises managers to develop four traits of innovation: awareness, curiosity, focus and initiative. Regarding awareness, Canterucci suggests that we become self-aware by starting to notice our thoughts — where they are and how they affect our emotions and actions. This includes: accepting different perspectives; being aware by using all of our senses; and looking closely at processes — how and why things are done.

The next trait he embraces is curiosity — stating that once you open yourself to the nuances of life, it’s hard not to find things that fascinate you and to begin wondering why. He advises that to develop curiosity, one should routinely seek opinions from people who have no experience with your industry or your problems; you should seek alternative solutions — even when all is well, you should try new things — you will learn lessons to apply elsewhere; and finally notice and eliminate assumptions as they are often wrong, yet we accept them as “fact.”

So how does this apply to the grain and feed business? Think of how an owner of the local insurance agency or the manager of your local bank might look at how you run your business. Seek opinions from these people and see what they have to say. What would happen if you tried something new — say calling 10 of your best customers on the phone every other day to find things that fascinate them? How are you currently using your senses? What would happen if you opened your mind to different perspectives? And, why not try a new way of doing something?

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Younglove was selected to design and construct the additions in Livermore, Kentucky. These additions included a new 16-bin, 2,400-ton loadout tower; a 4-pack of 32-foot-diameter silos; and replacement of the existing horizontal pellet coolers. Providing engineering, general construction, slipform and tilt-up concrete construction, and equipment installation, Younglove completed this project in 12 months while Perdue maintained plant operations.

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Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a “lateral” thinking method that asks people to come up with ideas and solutions to problems that may at first seem unworkable or shocking. Then these ideas can be changed and improved into useful concepts which are sometimes amazingly original. Lateral thinking is a term coined by psychologist Edward de Bono to describe a method of thinking concerned with changing concepts and perception. This is in contrast to what de Bono calls “parallel” thinking, where individuals are thinking in the same direction.

The basic approach

Advertising executive Alex Osborn developed the fundamentals of brainstorming in the 1940s. He decided that conventional methods of overcoming obstacles and creating new ideas were too inhibitive and were not conducive to real creativity. He developed four fundamental rules for brainstorming, which we continue to use today when evoking this process:

1. Focus on quantity: The group should come up with as many ideas as possible. The thought is that the larger the volume of ideas generated, the greater the chance of producing a radical and effective solution.

2. No criticism: Criticism can stifle creativity. In group brainstorming (discussed in more detail below), criticism should be put “on hold.” A supportive atmosphere is created when group members suspend judgment, and people feel freer to generate strange ideas. NOTHING kills a brainstorming session quicker than the “that’s a dumb idea” comment – especially from a leader.

3. Unusual ideas are welcome: Coming up with unusual ideas, allows the group to generate more ideas. In addition, unusual, unique ideas may open new ways of thinking and can be generated by looking at situations or problems from another perspective or setting aside assumptions.

4. Combine and improve ideas: Individual good ideas can be combined to generate a single very good idea. The building of ideas is often helped by taking someone else’s idea and putting a different spin on it.

Individual brainstorming

It is often suggested that prior to involving a team in a brainstorming session, that your team first engage in individual brainstorming. The thought here is that when you brainstorm on your own, you will produce a wider range of ideas than the group will. In other words, “groupthink” (where people kind of get stuck in a “rut”) will not occur. In addition, you do not have to be concerned about other people’s opinions and can thus be more creative. Like the group approach described below, you should give individuals a well defined outline of the problem you want solved, and lay out any criteria that need to be met.

Group brainstorming

Using your team to brainstorm as a group is where this approach gets to be real fun! This approach can be very effective because it uses the experience and creativity of all members of the group.

As mentioned above, to start the group brainstorming session you as manager should define the problem you want addressed and outline any parameters. Then, utilize the four rules discussed previously: 1. Come up with as many ideas as possible;

2. No criticism of any thoughts or ideas;

3. No idea should be considered too outlandish;

4. Team members should build upon one another’s ideas.

In addition you should strive to keep the session focused on the
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Three dumb things we do

Sometimes, brainstorming is about defining the problem or question. Most of us want to get better, to make our organization more successful. However, where to start? A starting point may or may not be clear in your feed and grain firm. But, how many times have you overheard an employee, or heard a peer, or said it yourself, “that is a dumb way to do things.” A lot of employees accumulate “dumb things we do” in their heads, but may never act on them unless given an opportunity. So periodically, have a “dumb things we do” meeting and get this stuff on the surface. Then, you can brainstorm ways to fix the problem. Over time, your employees will start watching for “dumb things” and bring them to the table for discussion – especially if the issues are taken seriously and something is done about them. If “dumb things” is too negative, try ‘one thing we could do better,’ one way we could make life better for our customers, etc. Either way, we are describing some first steps toward supporting a culture for continuous improvement.

An effective employee suggestion program – beyond the suggestion box

As mentioned above, creative ideas often come from your employees, and you can encourage this participation with a well designed suggestion program. The reward for implemented suggestions should be clearly defined from the start. If the suggestion is a cost-savings idea, perhaps you should reward the employee with a percentage of the cost savings (perhaps 20% to 25% percent of the proven cost savings). However, remember that cost savings are sometimes difficult to “prove,” if you don’t have good numbers defining the process before your employee’s suggestion is implemented. The recommendation is to be as quantitative as possible.

Less measurable ideas can be rewarded with some sort of standard reward. In fact, the recognition itself is often the most important to the employee. Rewards might be gift certificates or merchandise with your firm’s logo, or points toward purchasing catalog items. Feedback to people with suggestions should be made in private, especially if you choose not to implement their suggestion. Conversely, if you implement an employee suggestion and particularly if it results in a reward, it pays dividends to publicly acknowledge the contribution at a staff meeting or perhaps on a bulletin board.

Upshot

We are all running hard anymore with too much to do and not enough time to do it. But, getting better means stepping away every now and then, and letting the imagination run. It means tapping into the creativity of your employees, and making sure they too are thinking about how you can get better. Bill Gates takes one week per year, to go away and think about the future of his business. No phone calls, no e-mails. Nothing but a stack of papers with ideas from

his employees about what and how Microsoft should approach their incredibly fast changing business world. He calls this ‘Think Week.’ If Mr. Gates can find a week, surely we can scrape together a few hours!