



TALENT

# Choose your own adventure

How encouraging staff to channel their specialist skills can increase productivity and innovation.



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**I**t's not about the destination, it's more about the journey."

So often in life, this adage rings true. But when it comes to coaxing the best results from staff, I'd argue the opposing stance. Continuing the travel analogy, instead of dictating the exact steps each team member must take to reach a company's desired "destination", drop a pin at that destination and let them find their own way there. Assembling the right team and sharing with them desired business outcomes, then freeing them to use their unique approaches and specialist skills to achieve that outcome autonomously, puts a company on the fast-track to success.

When you look at the DNA of successful small businesses – be it a suburban retail operation or a tech start-up with a global footprint – you'll see the importance placed on organising teams and implementing frameworks so staff can self-manage and play to their strengths. My own company, Outfit, was conceived at a "hack day" I held at my software consulting business, NetEngine; the result of letting good people tap into their specialist skillset to innovate, create and experiment over beers on a Friday.

Business leaders and owners need to lead by example and innovation needs to come from the top down.

There is immense value in businesses letting good people apply their unique know-how and follow their passions to investigate and innovate. Staff need to

know it's okay to experiment, to trial new and better ways to do things and, yes, to occasionally fail. Sometimes the only outcome from experimentation is the absolute assurance that something can't be done, but even that can be spun as a positive result.

**"TRANSPARENCY BREEDS LOYALTY. SHARE PLANS AND VISIONS, THOUGHTS AND IDEAS, EVEN BUSINESS COSTS AND REVENUE DETAILS WITH STAFF."**

So often, small-business owners feel they have neither the time, the staff nor the budget to invest in innovation. It's a tricky situation: on the one hand, small businesses work to tight margins and would cease to operate if half the team went off "innovating" for a month. On the other hand, businesses need to constantly evolve and grow to capture and retain the market. This is where the earlier journey analogy comes into play. Share business goals with team members and inspire staff to apply their unique skills and specialties to develop their own solutions and ideas for the business.

Transparency breeds loyalty. Share

plans and visions, thoughts and ideas, even business costs and revenue details with staff. In turn, encourage team members to share their own passions and interests – as well as their ultimate career goals – to best utilise their skills and specialties in the time they are employed.

This last point is particularly relevant as staff retention timeframes are shortening across the board, especially across the technology and start-up industries. The skillsets of these staff are in such high demand a business needs to be doing something really special to keep people for more than three years. It's counterproductive to shoehorn staff into a convenient role or force them along a strict career path, pretending they'll stay in the one business for the rest of their lives.

Fluidity and agility are key when it comes to placing the right person in the right role. Speaking personally, Outfit has 26 staff and contractors and I know that in even six months' time, those people who are still with us will not have the same job title or responsibilities as they do now.

Transparency also breeds business success. Ask employees not just what they want to get out of their current role, but how the business can help them achieve that. Fostering bi-directional trust and transparency inspires staff to deliver their best, for themselves and the business.

Share your destination, don't dictate the journey. ■