

Challenging Ideas Challenges

Love them or hate them, ideas challenges are an old favourite in the public sector – but how effective are they?

The February 2019 Public Sector Innovation Network (PSIN) meeting unpacked the good, the bad, and the ugly of ideas challenges using real public sector case studies. The general consensus was that while ideas challenges are great in bringing staff together, they're rarely successful all the way through to idea implementation.

Strong themes emerged when breaking down the lessons learnt, and we've pulled together some advice based on discussion at the meeting.

THE DO'S

Get exec buy-in before proceeding

To get your ideas challenge off the ground, you'll more than likely need support from your executive at some stage of the process. Executive endorsement will ensure the solution can actually be implemented, and will encourage staff to get involved. Ideas challenges should also be linked to the business objectives of the organisation.

Set aside budget for the winning idea/s

Make sure you've got dollars set aside to bring the ideas to life. While it's great to get staff together and think about what could be done better, without dedicated funds to see the successful idea through to fruition, ideas challenges can seem like a waste of everyone's time. It can also be disheartening for staff when they've been told their idea won (yay!) but there's no money to make it happen (no!).

Dedicate staff and resources to run the process

Organising a whole-of-department program of work takes a lot of time and resources. A dedicated team will be needed to run the process, assess ideas, and communicate with the organisation.

Be transparent and manage staff expectations

Staff expectations should be managed from the outset with clear and regular communication throughout the challenge. Tell staff about the step-by-step process, timeframes and responsibilities. Tell them how the successful idea will be developed and implemented and what will happen to the ideas that don't get selected to progress. Update people along the way.

People also like to know what eventuated with their idea, so think about how to get back to them. Radio silence is off-putting and can easily deter people from wanting to participate again, so if your agency is really large you might like to consider alternative options like bulk responses or delegating amongst a team of people to spread the load.

Motivate staff to participate

It can be tricky to motivate staff to do something outside of their 'normal' job. Incentives help, so get thinking about some (realistic) incentives for staff to get involved, other than just the street cred.

Provide 'pitch' support

Live 'shark tank' style pitches are becoming popular. Pitching is a skill, and finalists might appreciate some pitch training and feedback to help 'sell' their idea to the executive. Your internal communication team may be able to assist.

Check the viability of the solution before announcing it

If you've followed the steps above and have a dedicated budget, have managed staff expectations and communicated effectively, you should be in the clear. You should however, check with your various departmental policies and systems before going ahead. *E.g. will our IT system allow us to integrate a new app that tells us when we need more milk?*

Acknowledge the winner and contributors

People like to be recognised and/or rewarded for their efforts, so have a reward/recognition plan for the winner and for all contributors. Contributors could simply receive an email (copied to their manager if appropriate). Winners could be presented with a certificate and/or prize at an internal event, they could be profiled on an internal channel or an all-staff email could be sent from the Secretary – whatever works for your culture.

THE DON'TS

Go in without a plan of attack

Running an ideas challenge for the sake of it is never recommended. Have a clear purpose, project plan, communication plan and change management plan that encompass the elements outlined in the 'do' section.

Underestimate how much work it involves

Ideas challenges aren't a 'set and forget' tool – they require a strategy, a lot of planning and many dedicated resources. Planning and executing may take longer than expected.

Leave ideas unattended

People like to know what's happening with the process, so ensure you have a change management process in place and keep people informed regularly via your communications plan.

Surprise a team with extra work

Decide at the outset how ideas are going to be implemented and inform teams that may be called upon to progress an idea, even if the idea didn't come from that team. For example, if there is an idea about how to improve an IT process, make sure the IT team knows that they will be asked to implement it.

Alternatives to ideas challenges

Explore short hackathons or ideation workshops as alternatives to ideas challenges. They can be run in 1-2 days and will work best with a trained facilitator. All the same Do's and Don'ts apply.

Another alternative is to provide an ongoing open ideas platform where staff can submit ideas at any time. This will also require dedicated resources.

Other tips & tricks

- An effective way to get people involved and submit ideas easily is to place an anonymous ideas 'box' near the microwave in the kitchen. This gives people something to do while they wait and makes it easy for them to get involved. Win-win!
- You can action your ideas once they're themed by sending them to each team responsible. E.g. send all the HR related ideas to that area, for the experts to decide what action should be taken. But make sure they know first.
- Partner with a marketplace provider for your solution, as this will make it easier to get off the ground.
- Think about taking staff offline for a whole day to workshop and prototype winning ideas.

Other useful resources

We've done some research and found a few other websites that provide useful guidance on running ideas challenges. You may notice some very common themes!

<https://www.innovationexcellence.com/blog/2016/09/09/how-to-run-a-successful-innovation-challenge/>

<https://ideawake.com/2017/03/11/launching-idea-challenge-7-easy-steps/>

<https://collabco.com.au/10-tips-for-ideas-challenges/>



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