No matter how approachable you think you are, chances are good that your employees are withholding valuable intelligence from you.

Employees hesitate to speak up for two key reasons: 1) A fear of consequences and 2) a sense of futility.

When employees speak up, your organization can see better performance and improved levels of trust – IF you get it right. Getting it right pays off – both for workers eager to make contributions to your organization, and also for the clients you serve.

Here are eight Best Practices for your consideration.

- **Make feedback a regular, casual exchange.** When you ask for input frequently and hold the conversations face-to-face, idea-sharing will feel less ominous and more natural.

- **Meet regularly** with your team. Occasionally, make “employee input” the top item on the agenda.

- **Be transparent.** Clearly state the type of conversation you’ll be having – for example, brainstorming, problem-solving or planning. Explain the kinds of problems or possibilities you want to discuss. From the outset, spell out your guidelines – as well as your commitment to take suggestions seriously. This will give employees hope that selected changes will actually be implemented.

- **Reach out.** If you really want to know what people think about something, go ask them. Otherwise, employees may seek you out only when things are getting really bad for them. Soliciting feedback informally can be much more effective than just being open to it when it comes your way.

  One reason “management by walking around” works so well is that it shifts the home field advantage to the staff – the conversation happens on their territory – not yours.

- **Branch out.** When you ask for feedback, go to the people who know something you don’t. People in your immediate network are probably similar to you in background, perspective and knowledge – so branch out. Chances are you’ll learn something helpful.

  Also, new staff members can tell you how other organizations operate and will have a fresh perspective on your organization’s strengths and weaknesses.
• **The furniture matters.** Furnish your office and/or a small conference room with a small round table with chairs of the same size and quality. Remember: There’s no “head” at a round table.

• **Really listen – and don’t throw cold water!**
  For a start, try not to shut out good suggestions that don’t happen to jibe with your current priorities.

  Assure people that they don’t need to make an ironclad case for every suggestion. You don’t want them to worry about looking dumb or getting in trouble if they don’t have all the answers.

  When the first brave souls speak up – especially with comments that challenge how things are done – thank them and publicly acknowledge that you value their input.

  Unfortunately, sometimes you have to explain “why not.” Be sure to listen respectfully and thank the person for the idea. Do not respond immediately with negative feedback. Consider explaining why the idea could work well in a different environment. Take advantage of the opportunity to educate your team about the bigger picture, and also share barriers both inside and outside your organization.

  At the end of the conversation, reiterate your appreciation.

• **ACT. This is imperative.**
  If you don’t want people to think their ideas went straight to the trash can, start implementing at least one idea or solve at least one problem that was brought up. Set a timetable and report your progress.

  Even the best-intentioned leaders fall down on follow-up because they’re busy fighting fires. So think about adopting processes that include formal next steps. An effective tactic is simply to adhere to strict, well-publicized timelines for collecting, evaluating and implementing ideas.

  Along the way, be sure to acknowledge the person who deserves credit for the suggestion, and make positive statements about the importance of speaking up.

**GO FORTH!**
Employees feel inspired when they know you take their suggestions seriously and implement them. Still, getting the ideas you want and need from your team will always be a challenge.

What will make a difference is taking steps to assure people that it’s both safe and worthwhile to contribute – no matter where they sit in your organization.