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Pillsbury's Recipe Is Candid Talk

Company execs know exactly what's on their employees' minds.

By Gillian Flynn

The most important information a company can have is the kind it rarely gets: frank, unreserved, this-is-how-it-is feedback from employees. No matter how many rallying speeches managers give about how their doors are always open, about how they want employees to challenge them, that sliver of fear remains. Where's the line between offering constructive criticism and giving offense? How can anyone be sure today's pointed conversation won't influence tomorrow's performance review?

Minneapolis-based The Pillsbury Company has the answer. A unique employee-feedback tool, a hot line called InTouch, allows anyone to phone any time and talk about anything with the comfort of anonymity and the assurance that their issues will be addressed. The technology used isn't particularly innovative—but the way in which the company uses it is.

"Getting this feedback wasn't fun the first time out, and sometimes it still isn't," says Lou de Oeejo, senior vice president of HR and corporate affairs. "But the system does just what we need it to do."

Pillsbury finds a recipe for frank feedback. The early '90s were a confusing time at Pillsbury. Between 1990 and 1993, the food company experienced a major shakeup of senior management, had been acquired by British-based conglomerate Grand Metropolitan PLC, started growing globally and had massively restructured, tossing away functional silos.

The new management team, including de Oeejo, realized a new communications plan was in order. It introduced an employee newspaper and CEO luncheons with employees—anything

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to encourage employee interaction with top management. "It's easy for executives to talk a lot and assume they're having conversations," says de Oeejo. "And it's hard as hell to get employees to risk telling you what's really going on."

It's a nationwide problem, according to Market Facts' TeleNation, a Chicago-based independent research organization. In a 1997 poll of 638 employees, more than 90 percent said they had good ideas on how their companies could run more successfully. Yet more than 50 percent said a lack of management interest and lack of a good means for sharing those ideas prevented them from communicating their ideas to management.

While de Oeejo was looking for a better communication tool for his company, Peter Lilienthal was looking for clients for his sole product, InTouch. Lilienthal had started his Minneapolis company, Management Communications Systems Inc., thinking InTouch would be an easy sell. In his previous career as a corporate officer at several large corporations, Lilienthal had been reluctant to criticize his superiors. "I wondered how everyone else must feel," he said. "That gave me an idea on how to improve communications." That idea was the anon-



Pillsbury's InTouch system has generated approximately 200 product and cost-savings ideas since 1993.

going to [hear] from employees. But if you're really interested in improving communications, you should want to know."

Lilienthal only had one client when he met de Oeejo at a dinner party in 1993. Over the evening's courses, de Oeejo explained Pillsbury's communications problem to Lilienthal, and Lilienthal explained to de Oeejo how InTouch could work at the company. Employees from all locations could dial a number around the clock and leave

Seasoning to taste: Pillsbury adapts the system. Executives bombarded employees with information about InTouch. The workforce received stickers, business cards and magnets, inviting workers to "direct your opinions straight to Pillsbury management." Employees, says de Oeejo, were cynical. But they also, apparently, were desperate for a safe means of voicing themselves. The calls came pouring