Stadtwerke Kiel

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Managing Innovation

Changing the innovation culture in Stadwerke Kiel

In 2000/2001 the US energy concern TXU took over 51% of SWK. As part of the transition process and before the takeover an innovation programme was introduced as one mechanism to help secure god integration between old and new organisations. The programme was open-ended and offered the opportunity for staff of SWK to offer their ideas and put forward suggestions about how to make the business more effective in the future – essentially a chance to alleviate some of their anxiety about the changeover by helping to shape the future.

The design of the programme involved an open invitation to participate in a series of 2 day Innovation workshops; this attracted over 100 people from right across the organisation and involving several different layers in the organisation. From the outset the Betriebsrat were consulted and involved and they sent representatives to each of the workshops. Organisation was in the hands of a team involving an external facilitator, two TXU staff and 4 SWK staff from the Human Resources dept; the workshops were held at the SWK's training school.

The format of each workshop was the same. An initial presentation was made by members of senior management from both SWK and TXU with the incoming Managing Director playing a key role. The purpose of this was to challenge the participants t think creatively because of the urgency for the SWK to change to help it deal with an increasingly difficult and uncertain environment. It also sent a clear message about the value placed upon the process and the ideas which would emerge – something reinforced by the fact that the same management team returned at the end of each workshop to receive presentations about the suggested ideas.

The workshop then involved a combination of exercises and talks aimed at bringing home to the group the nature of the challenges facing the SWK and the need for creative thinking by everyone to come up with new ideas – in other words, to innovate. Emphasis was placed on sharing some simple creativity tools and problem finding/solving approaches so that by the end of the first morning the group was prepared to begin developing its own ideas. Each workshop was then split into four groups, each taking as a general challenge one of four umbrella themes:

How can SWK become:

- Fast?
- More flexible?
- More efficient?
- More innovative?

Each group then worked through a range of ideas for the rest of the day and for the following morning, with support from the facilitators. A large number of suggestions were made but the process gradually involved selecting a few and working these up into a stronger case for presentation back to the senior management. During the second day the key ideas were sorted in terms of implementability and potential benefit and presented back to senior management. The workshops concluded with a commitment by senior management to 'hear' all the ideas and then move things forward.

After six workshops the next stage was to collate the large number of ideas and sort them in terms of three categories:

A   can be implemented easily and quickly by those directly involved

B   require some extra support or cross- functional co-operation

C   could be developed into a new business opportunity or major internal project