I recently visited my GP for a health check, and was very interested to see affixed to the wall of the patients waiting room a box with the word “Suggestions” proudly emblazoned on it. My curiosity aroused, I enquired from a rather bemused doctor the reason for the box and what use was made of it. His response was not encouraging. The practice manager had decided on its implementation, and the only “suggestions” received had been complaints about the length of time someone had been kept waiting!

This, however, is not untypical of the way in which such receptacles are used (or rather abused). The very name “suggestions box” is reminiscent of a bygone age (steam trains and free health care, etc.) and does absolutely nothing to capture the imagination of the enquiring mind whose creativity knows no bounds.

Although not a recent innovation – in fact the use of “suggestion schemes” were first recorded in Japan in the fifteenth century – they have become increasingly popular as an effective management tool during the 1990s. There appear to be a number of reasons for this, not least, the failure of the effective delivery of total quality management programmes to enthuse and motivate organisations, and the cost-effective way in which a suggestion scheme can be introduced with very little administration and bureaucracy.

Within the Health Service generally, there is little evidence to support the notion that the use of suggestion schemes is widespread, and yet in isolated pockets, where notice has been taken of employees’ ideas, the response has shown positive results. An example from Southampton University Hospital’s NHS Trust Suggestion Scheme, was the “Captive Wheelchair” which used the same token operated mechanism as a supermarket trolley which ensured that expensive equipment was not left stranded in car parks or throughout hospital grounds, but returned to their rightful place immediately outside out-patients or A & E departments.

The suggestion was a simple one, but no one had thought of it before, which is usually the case with many good ideas. This indeed seems to cause the paradox within suggestion schemes in that we ask for “simple ideas” from employees, and then introduce an elaborate and administratively burdensome procedure to deal with them! The answer is straightforward: simple ideas, simple procedures to deal with them – it is as simple as that!
Harnessing employee creativity

Within the “empowered approach” now being adopted in organizations, with more authority being devolved to line managers, the introduction of a simple approach to capture employee creativity can easily be achieved within the precept of a suggestion scheme. What has to be recognized is that you will not completely suppress employee creativity. If employees are not treated with the respect and dignity that they rightly deserve by being listened to, they will react in a way which could damage the organization. Whether this be verbally within the workplace or, worse, outside it, or, in extreme cases, by using their creative energy in an obstructive or destructive way which may even include acts of sabotage.

The two most readily voiced comments from employees when asked “What do you feel about the organization?” are most likely to be “lack of recognition” and “lack of communication”. Yet without considering any other factors, these two concerns alone can be quickly addressed and solved by the introduction of something as simple and as easily understood as an employee suggestion scheme, if there is a commitment and a will to want to improve things.

The need for top management support

The most important aspect of all when considering the introduction of a suggestion scheme is management support and commitment at the highest level, without which the scheme is doomed to failure. Support, however, goes much further than a chief executive giving a mere nod of approval. It has to be both “real and visible” support with the chief executive willing to appear at present high level awards, perhaps on an annual basis, and also to lend his/her name to support the scheme in its introduction, perhaps by a signed letter to all employees. Above all, to capture the interest of such busy, high level people, the objective of the scheme must mirror the organization objectives, be it “patient care”, “profitability”, “shareholder/stakeholder value”, etc.

Introducing a suggestion scheme

Once this support is elicited, a timescale should be agreed for the introduction of the scheme. One common mistake is for it to be introduced too quickly without proper research being carried out as to why you want a suggestion scheme and what are its aims and objectives. Once the reasons for its introduction are clear, these need to be communicated to the whole organization together with an agreed timescale for implementation.

Critical success factors

Having been given chief executive approval for the scheme, a list of critical success factors would include the following:

- commitment – from middle/junior management;
- involvement – everyone should be eligible;
- assessment – sympathetic evaluation of ideas;
- resources – effective administration/systems;
- budget – for awards/publicity;
- promotion – publicity throughout the organization;
- benefits – should be known and promulgated;
- implementation – measuring success of the scheme.

One of the dangers to be aware of when introducing a suggestion scheme is not to treat it as being “outside” the organization. For example, it should slip easily into any existing management methods for improving employee relations and increasing efficiencies and productivity and not be seen to be simply “nice to have”. The scheme should be marketed and “sold” to all employees in the same way as the organization’s goods and services are sold to the buying public. In other words, the scheme’s “customers” are those inside the organization to whom you wish to “sell” the image of the scheme, what benefits it can bring to them, and to make them so “delighted” with their treatment that they will want to come back and buy again by giving you more and more well thought out ideas which will benefit both them and the business.

Organizational “fit”

Although the main reasons for the introduction of an employee suggestion scheme are usually cost savings, it has to be thought of as a way in which organizational change can be effected through the establishment of a high trust environment by directing attention to the positive and progressive aspects of the job. However, it
is of little use expecting a suggestion scheme to sit comfortably in an organization where employees are not encouraged to express their views. It is probably even more futile to expect suggestions to make any progress at all if they have to negotiate in and with an organization where departments and functions are self-protecting.

What prompts suggestions?
But why and how do suggestion schemes work, and what is their appeal? There is sadly a misconception that seems to be held by senior management that people submit suggestions mainly for financial reward. Yet research seems to indicate that although money has a strong motivating effect, it certainly is not the primary reason why suggestions are made.

The whole area of the theory of motivation is a complex one and many studies abound as to why and how people are “motivated”. Suffice it to say that one of the main reasons why people make suggestions for improvement is that they have identified an easier way of doing something just for themselves. Although this appears at first sight to be a rather selfish attitude, it nevertheless is normal behaviour to make any task simpler and easier to complete with minimal effort. We all do it, at every given opportunity. What we fail to do is to take that further within the workplace by bringing it to the attention of line management in a formalized way so that the benefits can be transmitted throughout the organization. By doing this, the organization could benefit very substantially if the suggestion can be implemented across a whole department or site, thus making that particular task easier for many people.

Reward and recognition
I referred earlier to the respect and dignity that should be afforded to everyone within the organization. A suggestion scheme is an excellent way of overcoming inertia within the workplace and if designed around an appropriate reward and recognition architecture can overcome many of the fears and prejudices that abound within the organization.

Unfortunately, when the word reward is mentioned, money is the thing that most people think of. But in fact it is the recognition aspect that is more important. How often have you heard people complaining that their boss does not seem to recognize them? Well, suggestion schemes are an excellent way in which people can be recognized. If someone has a good idea that can benefit the organization and it can be seen to “add value”, then it should be implemented with the minimum of fuss and the maximum amount of publicity. The suggestor should receive as much “exposure” as possible and an award commensurate with the savings and efficiencies of the idea should be made.

The “reward” is seeing the idea actually in place and benefiting the organization; do not underestimate the motivating effect this has on people. Again, the award does not always have to be cash. There are many ways of rewarding people that will remind them of their contribution to the organization long after the money is spent.

In some cases, the suggestion scheme has been used to identify creative individuals within the organization, i.e. those who are continually coming up with new and better ways of doing things. Maybe these people should be doing different work at a higher level than they are currently operating. Other organizations use the number of suggestions submitted by employees as an indicator to reward them formally at appraisal time. They also use the suggestion scheme to identify supportive or poorly performing managers by building-in a target number of implemented suggestions per employee per year as part of their annual performance review.

Conclusions
There is much that can be achieved with a little thought and not a lot of capital outlay. Employees are continually coming up with better ways of doing things, but they are simply not telling the organization about their achievements! Only when we start thinking “beyond the box”, by letting our minds concentrate on the positive aspects of the job and allowing employees to be creative, will we begin to close the gap between the “us and them” mentality that pervades our organizations and creates artificial barriers to organizational understanding and effectiveness. A suggestion scheme should not be dismissed as being of “old world thinking” just because it does not come with a fancy sounding title. It can be used most effectively in so many ways given a little thought and attention!