
HOW TO...

Staff An Idea

AN Williams

Introduction

Many officers and soldiers have good ideas; few are put into practice. Many opportunities to save lives, increase efficiency and improve working lives are lost as a consequence. How can you get that brilliant idea accepted?

Understand the system

First, you must understand the system. Not just how to process anything, but why, and who is doing the processing. The Army is extremely bureaucratic, and many individuals are strongly conservative in their beliefs and in the way they work. This is not a criticism, it is inevitable. All armies have been thus and always will be. In fact, if every 'good idea' was put into practice the Army would be utterly chaotic and bankrupt.

You must remember that it is hard to sell a solution to someone who doesn't realise there is a problem. It is even harder to sell it when that staff officer has told everyone else there isn't a problem. It is also much easier to criticise than it is to have new ideas, and the system is automatically critical of all issues that flow through it; it is intended to be. The criticism should be positive, but unfortunately often ends up negative. Furthermore, new ideas are automatically critical of the current system if they are to prove their worth, and why did no-one think of them before?

The correct system of staffing

If you ask anyone what to do with your idea, the answer will hopefully be 'staff it' (*with an 'a'*). This means that you write a proposal and pass it up the chain of command until it reaches the desk with the money to put it into practice. The proposal is being fed into a bureaucratic system, so the rules have to be followed. Military papers have to be written in an exact style; if you conform exactly the system will be impressed. Failure to follow the rules may result in the proposal being rejected out of hand, and its author labelled as an idiot regardless of how good the idea is or how well the proposal was written. Advice should be taken from someone who knows the rules, which are laid out clearly in JSP 101.

The staffing system is designed to get information down to units, not up to the centre. Although it achieves the transmission of information from Army Command to Unit level in the same time as Cromwell's New Model Army managed it, it generally does so in an organised manner that ensures

all those who need to know are informed, and everyone understands their responsibilities. It does not, however, have to do this in reverse. Thus, once a proposal has left a unit, its author will have little idea where it has gone, and will not be told that a desk officer somewhere has decided not to allow it to proceed any further.

Many desk officers will have no understanding of the subject (and cannot therefore recognise it as a 'good idea') and will have plenty of other work to get on with. Each good idea will represent additional work that they really do not want. Why should they work late for you?

Processing time

On the other hand, you may not realise that your idea is being processed, it may have to pass across ten or twelve desks in a variety of headquarters taking a month each time, wait for a couple of six-monthly meetings and then fall off the budget allocation two years in a row. It may therefore be processed correctly but take five years to fruition. This is pretty much standard for small ideas; big ideas take fifteen years! This system is optimistically called the 'procurement cycle'.

There is, however, a fast track. If there is a real need on operations it is possible to staff an '*urgent operational requirement*' or UOR. This has to come from theatre with a good justification, and can be met in very short timeframes (days even), particularly if it is simple and straightforward.

How to ensure an idea is being staffed, and keep visibility of progress

Most ideas will disappear into the staffing black hole. The simplest blocking technique is to send it back with recommendations for changes; the route up and down can take longer than a tour in post, so the paperwork dies a quiet, unmourned death in a closed file.

The best staffing happens when everyone up the chain wants it to happen. Staff officers will work late if they know the author of a proposal and think either that they are a good egg or the idea is brilliant. Better still, if their boss knows the author, *and* thinks the idea is brilliant, one really is on to a winner. It is highly desirable, therefore, to win over the chain of command. This comes through networking and opportunism. Networking

Lt Col AN Williams
RAMC
Consultant in
Occupational Medicine,
MOD-AMS,
FASC, Slim Road,
Camberley, Surrey,
GU 14 4NP.

means getting out and about; arranging to visit the headquarters, being nice to the staff, getting known, not upsetting them. Opportunities will arise to explain an idea to senior staff officers; an idea should not be pushed if they clearly don't understand or don't want to know, but the opening must be spotted when it comes. It is vital to know when to stop pushing; and whatever happens, not to push so hard that the result is a firm 'no'. This could permanently block the idea until that senior officer retires or changes post. If you can get a series of allies up the chain, the idea is much more likely to be a winner. Allies should be used as 'information addressees' and it is important to be bold; if a general visits and agrees that an idea should be staffed, it is important to mention this in the proposal and to send an information copy to his MA. Any desk officer seeing this will think twice about slipping the paperwork into the bin.

Keeping visibility is usually straightforward. A few telephone calls will usually track down the paperwork; it is best not to push, just to ask for anticipated timelines. If it involves something being made, particularly over a period of time, it is a good idea to ask or offer to visit. In most cases, those building an item will be only too pleased to meet its originator; it adds the personal touch and they feel they are really doing something for someone. You can often help; if they say they are having great difficulty with one aspect of the design, it can be changed then and there to make the manufacturing process much easier without affecting the overall outcome.

Timing

Often there is just too much happening in the system for an idea to get priority. The best course of action is just to keep it up your sleeve, with an eye open for the right moment. That moment will come; possibly after a wait of several years, and the idea may have to be passed on to someone else to run with. What could take a huge amount of effort now, could shoot through the staffing system later when priorities change.

Bucking the system

It is important to beware of bypassing the staffing system. It can bite back. Even if you use it correctly but list too many information addressees, it can abreact and abort the process. You can, however, sometimes spot an opening. Quite often someone somewhere else has identified a requirement without a

solution, and your idea is the solution needing support. It may be possible to slip the idea in without any need for the chain of command to be involved. This has one drawback; no-one will know whose idea it is. This becomes a problem when further input is required and the originator cannot be found.

GEMS

There is one excellent way to bypass the system. MoD realised a decade ago that the standard staffing system was losing many good ideas, so they developed a fast-track system. Called GEMS, this system allows anyone to put ideas straight in to the centre, to the desk officer responsible. Even better, they pay a significant award if the idea is accepted. This does speed things up, but at the cost of lost visibility, and therefore the loss of ability to influence. GEMS cannot always know where to send ideas for assessment, so it can land on the wrong desk and get a thumbs down.

Recognition

We all like recognition and praise, but it should not be expected every time. The chances are that someone else may have had the same idea, and ideas are often pinched. A degree of magnanimity and humility is sometimes required for the overall good of the Corps, and perhaps some credit should go to those who successfully staff the idea as well as those who had the idea in the first place. It is important not to make an issue out of it if you don't have to. If you believe that an idea has been hijacked along the way, the best course of action is to join forces if possible and to be prepared to accept minor changes. If an idea has already been accepted, GEMS will still give an award. It is also possible to apply for an annual AMS award; these are not only given for academic papers and they too come with a substantial purse.

Conclusions

It is possible with perseverance to have an idea developed (see examples). It is important to get some-one senior on-side as a sponsor or champion and to persuade the staffing chain before or as it is being staffed. You should not just sit back and wait, but follow the process to make sure it is not forgotten. A combination of persistence and diplomacy are key attributes to success. Good luck!

Some examples

Table 1. Medical side pouches.

| | |
|--------|---|
| Apr 86 | Idea developed by RMO 3 PARA |
| Aug 86 | Design sent direct to SCREDE, the MoD equipment designers (complete bypass of the staffing system by a naive young RMO) |
| Sep 86 | SCREDE used design to meet requirement for medical pack for SAS. |
| Oct 86 | First prototype sent to SAS who had no idea what it was for so left it in a cupboard. |
| Jan 87 | RMO chased up design, given second prototype |
| Jun 87 | Amended design, 30 made for 23 PFA to trial |
| Sep 88 | Design accepted |
| May 90 | 4,000 received from manufacturer, first batch issued to SAS |
| Aug 90 | First units deploy to Gulf, not issued side pouches as contents not agreed |
| Aug 92 | First units deploy to Bosnia, contents still not agreed so not issued side pouches |
| May 93 | RMO in Bosnia puts in UOR for side pouches, finally issued |
| Jan 94 | Remaining side pouches issued without contents |
| Jan 95 | Contents lists agreed |
| Nov 95 | Submitted to GEMS, awarded £440 |

Table 2. Role 1 medical boxes.

| | |
|--------|---|
| Mar 88 | Idea for new concept and design developed |
| Apr 88 | Paper staffed up chain of command |
| Apr 89 | Paper staffed out to UK units, universally supported, results sent to BAOR unit for development |
| Jun 90 | Original paper receives Alexander medal and purse of £550 |
| Jun 90 | BAOR unit develops completely different solution, no communication with original author, BAOR solution accepted |
| May 94 | Whole concept staffed again, new solution on lines of original paper |
| Nov 95 | Paper and concept submitted to GEMS, awarded £440 |

Table 3. Helicopter marker panel/rescue blanket.

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Jan 87 | Basha sized helicopter marker panel (luminous orange) designed with handles and tie points for use as stretcher, protective sheet and identification marker. |
| Feb 87-Mar 94 | Carried and used by designer, used in Kinabalu rescue |
| Jan 96 | Design submitted to GEMS and rejected |

Table 4. Requirement to review manning and equipment of 23 PFA.

| | |
|--------|---|
| Feb 98 | Paper sent up chain of command |
| Mar 98 | Paper rejected completely |
| Nov 98 | SDR requirement to merge 23 PFA with 19 Airmob Fd Amb |
| Feb 99 | New establishment tables proposed in accordance with original paper |
| Mar 99 | Establishment and equipment tables accepted in full |