

Innovation Drives Results in Downers Grove, Illinois

December 12, 2011

The lights are on - in more ways than one - in Downers Grove, Illinois, a suburb located approximately 20 miles west of Chicago. In 2010, Downers Grove became the first city in the nation to install a hybrid solar and wind powered street light system in one of its subdivisions. The Prentiss Creek Lighting System project earned the Village an American Public Works Association (APWA) Technical Innovation Award.

Innovation is not just a fancy buzzword in Downers Grove; rather, it has since become an official ingredient in the Village's recipe for success.

"Continual innovation" was adopted as an official Village goal in 2011. To keep this goal in focus, Downers Grove has a 10-member Innovation Team, which meets once a month. A five-member team meets once a week to keep projects and meetings on track.

The Innovation Team serves as ambassadors for the organization's three key management themes:

- Good ideas come from anyone and anywhere;
- Communication makes us better; and
- Tough on issues; easy on people.

Staff encouraged to submit ideas

To pilot the program, the Innovation Team issued a staff challenge, a two-week competition in which employees were encouraged to submit their innovative ideas to improve policies and procedures, management practices, and daily activities. They were also encouraged to submit ideas that increased productivity, decreased waste, and saved money. The challenge was a huge success, with 64 ideas submitted.

Innovation: from idea to reality

The Team prioritizes and analyzes the feasibility and value of each idea that it receives. Some ideas are delegated to appropriate staff members and simply put into action. More complex ideas are passed along to small implementation teams, comprised of six to eight members, who create plans and budgets for the idea. For example, the Innovation Team has created teams to work on employee wellness, a Village volunteer program, and text messaging code complaints.

Innovations - big and small - reap results

From two-sided printing on all Village Hall printers (estimated savings of \$1,000 per year) to consolidation of dispatch services between Downers Grove and neighboring Westmont (approximately \$300,000 in savings per year), considering new and different ways of doing things has paid off.

The Fleet Services Department, in particular, has realized significant benefits from the implementation of ideas resulting from the Village's culture of innovation. The Village operates a fleet of 77 percent alternative fuel vehicles. Its compressed natural gas vehicles achieve 35 miles per gallon at a cost of under \$1.00 per gallon.

To increase the life of Village vehicles, the fleet uses nitrogen tire fills. Fleet Services purchased a \$7,000 nitrogen tire fill machine which replaces oxygen in vehicle tires with nitrogen, generating a first-year savings of \$6,000 in fuel and \$9,000 in tire replacements.

A good idea in and of itself does not necessarily result in innovation. Positive change requires open-mindedness, a willingness to listen, and cooperative efforts in research, development, and implementation. Seems Downers Grove has this recipe mastered.

Editor's Note: A special "thank-you" to Steven Sanderson, Downers Grove Budget Officer/ Investment Officer, and to members of Downers Grove's Innovation Team who contributed the content for this article.