

## The 3I (Three Idea) Memo Program for Idea Generation

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### 1. Objective of the Program and Process

- To generate a *steady* stream of high-quality, usable ideas from all functional areas and levels within your organization
- Each idea submitted should offer a specific way to make money, save money or do something more efficiently
- In plain talk, the 3I program is a mandated suggestion box with a guaranteed, senior-level feedback mechanism

### 2. Main Criterion for Successful Execution

- CEO (or most senior-level executive in division) *must* commit time and attention to the program
- Must hold others accountable for monthly submissions of 3I memos (having an administrative assistant log and track all expected submissions keeps everyone honest)
- Schedule approx. three hours per month to read, ponder and comment on every idea submitted
- Talk up the program at company-wide (or division-wide) meetings, recognize exceptional ideas, hail contributors, and just plain make a big deal of the importance of the program

### 3. Who Should Contribute

- At middle to senior management and specialist levels, the 3I program should be non-voluntary (given their compensation, it's more than reasonable to expect these individuals to contribute profit-boasting ideas on an on-going basis)
- Specifically, *require* VPs, directors, dept. heads, and technical specialists to participate
- Make it optional for front-liners and lower-level specialists, but encourage them to contribute ideas (especially the ambitious ones)
- Allow managers to request and screen submissions from their staffs, and then submit the choice ideas (with each contributor's name associated, of course)

### 4. What 3I Memos Should Look Like

- Each contributor should submit three ideas on one side of a sheet of paper (or one computer screen) max
- Each idea should be stated as a headline, with 50-100 words of explanatory text following
- Allow space below each idea for the reviewer (generally the CEO) to respond with comments

### 5. Frequency of Memos and Quantity of Ideas

- Ultimately, the ideal frequency and quantity of submissions depends on the company size, number of employees, and maturity of the organization
- For Gazelle-size companies (\$5-200 million), requiring one 3I memo per month is probably just right, and since it's a rare employee that has more than three ideas worthy of consideration to offer per month, three ideas per memo works well
- If you require 25 individuals to hand in three ideas monthly, you can count on 75 mostly high-potential conceptions every 30 days

### 6. Ideal Sources for Ideas

- Talking to customers, clients and co-workers
- Recognizing inefficiencies (things that bother you on a regular basis)
- Discovering incremental improvements to systems and processes (obvious and not-so-obvious)
- Spotting opportunities (new products, enhancements to existing products, etc.)
- Reading books, magazines, tapes, and journals; attending trade shows and seminars
- Holding private "what if" brainstorming sessions with yourself

## 7. Procedural Tips for Contributors

- Throughout the month, as idea possibilities occur to you, make short notes on slips of paper and toss them into a “3I” file you’ll create
- Sort through them at the end of the month, determine the most likely-to-be-adopted ideas and then write them up
- It shouldn’t take more than 30 minutes to crank out a 3I memo
- Make identifying potential 3Is part of your everyday “thinking and being”

## 8. Give Feedback

- Message to the CEO: providing timely and constructive feedback is critical to this program – it will literally succeed or fail depending upon the extent to which you do this; therefore...
- *Reject gently* – explain exactly *why* an idea is not likely to work (don’t just write, “won’t work;” instead, explain how it was tried before and what went wrong, give a quick cost/benefit analysis, or present the limiting factors that make the idea impractical)
- *Ask smart questions* – if you need more info to evaluate an idea, pose probing queries that will make the contributor “think it through” (vs. you doing the thinking for the person)
- *Praise generously* – if you get a killer idea, lay on the acknowledgement and adulation -- *thick*
- *Return quickly* – return each 3I memo within one to two weeks of receiving it (always give back 3I memos – with your thoughtful comments -- before the next round of submissions is due)

## 9. Publish the Most Promising Ideas

- This communiqué is designed to 1) disseminate the ideas you want implemented ASAP (or at least considered), 2) showcase the praise-worthy contributors, and 3) generally reinforce the importance of the 3I program
- Determine the cream of the crop, which could be the top 10, 15 or 20 highest-potential ideas
- Reprint the original ideas as submitted along with your effusive praise (be sure to include the name of the contributor in **bold type**)
- Title this memo “The Top XX Ideas from the [month] Batch”
- Circulate it via email or hard copy to everyone in the organization

## 10. Reward Winning (i.e., *Published*) Ideas

- Offer just enough of a monetary reward that your employees will take the program seriously and continue to submit ideas month after month (without having to be prodded)
- \$20 per published idea seems incentive enough to get folks to write ‘em up and turn ‘em in
- Consider a more generous reward for the top 20 or so best-of-year ideas (\$500+ per winner will certainly provide ample year-long motivation to keep the ideation flowing)

## 11. Convert the Prime Ideas to Action

- Without meaningful follow through, this program will quickly be viewed as a waste of time
- When a no-brainer (or merely a promising) idea is recognized by the reviewer as actionable, it should be expediently converted into a stand alone document that conveys the next steps, complete with players involved, resources needed, timelines, etc.
- The reviewer should clearly state in his/her response who is expected to champion the idea (it may not be the one who conceived of the idea)
- If an idea is complex, It may make sense to request that a white paper, detailed memo, or planning document be drafted and routed to the individuals who will be affected

## 12. Track and Evaluate All Published Ideas

- Create a database spreadsheet for all winning ideas, with columns for the idea synopsis, the original 3I memo date, the contributor, the champion, and the status; also, assign a discrete master number to each idea (for easier tracking)
- In the status column, label each idea as “D” for done, “IP” for in progress, “NP” for no progress or “A” for abandoned – with this coding system, you can tell at a glance where each idea stands
- Once per quarter, update this database and review it with middle and senior managers to insure that the ideas are being carried through to their natural completion