Interview with Jag Randhawa, author of the new book *The Bright Idea Box*

Jag Randhawa is a technology executive, professional speaker, executive coach, and corporate consultant. He has more than twenty years of technology industry experience with a strong track record of building high performance teams and award-winning products. Born in India, Jag lives in the San Francisco Bay area with his wife, a neuroscientist, and two daughters.

Welcome, Jag. To begin, will you tell us just what is "The Bright Idea Box" that the title of your book refers to?

The Bright Idea Box refers to a program, in which employees suggest ideas to improve business processes, increase customer satisfaction, reduce operational costs, and raise the top line. Employees know company products, processes, and customers, and they often have ideas to improve the business operations and how to provide better service to customers, but often they have no means to voice these ideas. The Bright Idea Box creates that platform so that good ideas are captured, developed, and implemented.

Your book's subtitle is *A Proven System to Drive Employee Engagement and Innovation*. Do you believe employee engagement is lacking in the workplace today, and if so, why?

Gallup conducts regular surveys on Employee Engagement, and according to Gallup, employee engagement has been hovering around 26%. This means that "7 out of 10" employees are not working to their fullest potential. There are many factors that contribute to employee disengagement, including lack of alignment with job, poor communication, no growth opportunities, and lack of recognition. Now, none of these issues are new, but we are seeing increased negative effects from these factors as employees are facing more pressure from management to do more with less due to the 2008 economic recession. The good news is that all these issues can be cured with some very simple techniques, including some discussed in this book.

How does having a suggestion box change the lack of employee engagement? Don't a lot of companies already have suggestion boxes?

Yes, many companies implement suggestion boxes, but often they are a black hole. Suggestions go in, but nobody knows what happens to them afterwards. Also, employees have no incentive to go through the trouble of suggesting ideas. If, however, you change the dynamics by having management respond to every idea, and implement an open and transparent process for evaluating, prioritizing, and implementing ideas, employees feel that their ideas matter. In addition, if you recognize employees for implemented ideas, it calls to an inner desire to be recognized and appreciated by management. Asking employees for ideas does wonders for employee engagement and their productivity. Suddenly, they feel part of the success of the company. They are not just minions who are supposed to do what they are told, but rather

intelligent human beings who are capable of solving complex problems and their actions contribute to the growth of the company.

What do you do with unproductive suggestions? What if employees just want to use the box to complain about their jobs? Are the suggestions anonymous, and how do you deal with employees who don't want to be team players?

The unproductive are moved to the "Needs Development" stage, where it becomes up to the employee who submitted the idea to further refine the idea. Sometimes ideas don't make sense at all, and at other times, they need just a little tweaking. And sometimes new ideas emerge out the discussion around a not so good idea. Ideas are not anonymous. Otherwise you cannot credit the employee who came up with the good idea, and having a name attached to an idea also keeps the idea list cleaner. It is a very transparent process—all the information is visible and accessible to all employees at all times.

Have you received any negative feedback about the idea itself? Sometimes it seems like we live in a society where everyone wants credit and to be praised and thinks he deserves a medal just for doing his job. Wouldn't an employee suggestion box just add to that entitled mindset?

It is hard to find something that does not receive negative feedback. The most common complaint that I hear is that developing business cases for ideas is asking too much from employees. Many employees want to submit their opinions but don't want to invest the time and effort to investigate whether that idea makes sense. Then there are some who think they are doing management a favor by submitting their opinions. But the good news is that these are a small minority of employees. The program can be challenging in its beginnings, but I recommend not lowering idea standards; otherwise, you will end up wasting valuable time working on poor ideas and delaying implementation of good ideas.

You talk in the book about employees making productive suggestions—can you give us an example of what would be a productive vs. a nonproductive suggestion?

This is very important step of the program. As we know, employees can have varied degrees of experience, knowledge and expertise, and their ideas may not be thought through. Many employees are quick to submit their opinions without any thought to how their ideas may impact the company, customers or even their fellow employees. So, as part of implementing this program, you have to educate employees on how to self-evaluate ideas. A productive idea is something that has clear outcome(s) and a clear path to implementation or a way to test the idea. An example of a productive idea is placing an easy to find "forgotten password" link on the website, so that it reduces customer calls and frustrations. An example of a nonproductive idea might be to issue a new computer to employees every year or for a Medical Care Center to start manufacturing medical equipment just because it uses such equipment.

Once a productive suggestion is made, what needs to be done to implement it?

The first step is for management to recognize the employee for submitting a productive idea. Subsequently, assign the idea to resources for implementation so that the idea gets implemented in a timely manner. To encourage employees to submit more ideas, management should showcase the implemented ideas and publically recognize employees for their contributions.

I understand your book offers a six-step system to implement the Bright Idea Box concept. Can you tell us a little about that?

The book walks you through the six-steps of creating the program, which I call the MASTER innovation program. MASTER is an acronym for Mobilize, Amass, Support, Triage, Execute and Recognize. These steps outline all the crucial components for ensuring that the program is successful.

In what ways can management support this situation, and to what extent does it maybe just need to get out of the way?

What's most important is to encourage employees to submit ideas. The organization must also foster a culture where employees are encouraged to challenge existing processes and norms to improve the business and add value to customers. Second is to give employees the freedom to test and refine their hunches. Some companies set-aside a portion of employee time for experimentation and working on developing and testing new ideas. Setting aside seed capital to fund new ideas can boost the program, but it is not required. You will be surprised at how many high value ideas can be implemented with no extra money.

Won't implementing such a program take up a lot of time and extra management resources? Don't you have to hire people or assign additional tasks to people to determine which ideas are feasible and implement them? Is it really cost-effective to do all that?

It does not take much time or resources to implement this program. When I started this program, I spent about $300 in buying recognition pins and a canvas for posting employee pictures. I recruited other employees to volunteer their time for screening ideas and used an existing intranet system for collecting ideas. Everything about the program is flexible. You can keep it as low-key as you want or make it as elaborate as Google's 20% experimentation time.

Do you think growing up in India and then coming to Silicon Valley to work played any role in your philosophy about engaging employees and making them a part of the workforce? I guess I'm asking what makes you so passionate about the role of employees in a business?

Yes. I grew up on a farm in rural India. Along with running the farm, my father had a full-time teaching job. The only way for him to run a farm and do full-time teaching was by delegating and empowering all of the farm employees. I firsthand witnessed the impact of that on their

productivity. These were the most loyal, productive, and happy employees, who not only worked on our farm but also raised me. Even though we no longer live there, these people are still part of me and my family.

Silicon Valley taught me how to implement that empowerment culture in larger and established organizations. Empowering employees is not just good for the business; more importantly, it is good for employees' wellbeing and the society as a whole. Now, I have embarked on a life mission to improve the lives of billions of unhappy employees through this program.

What for you would be the best result achieved by people reading your book?

The immediate impact for people who implement this program at their companies is employee engagement and productivity. With higher levels of engagement, they will also notice an increase in customer satisfaction. With time, the quality of ideas will improve and they will start to see the impact on business operations. Now, there are no guarantees, but companies like Google, 3M, Zappos, and Whole Foods have built billion dollar brands using these principles. This program is also an excellent tool for attracting top talent and retaining high performance employees.

If these principles have already been used and been successful, why did you feel the need to write the book?

There is no book on the market that shows you how to engage employees in developing new ideas. There are many books on innovation, but most of them focus on new product development. As a matter of fact, I read more than fifty books to get to a point where I had enough knowledge to take on this challenge. I speak frequently on this topic and I get asked every time where to find more information about implementing such a program. Unfortunately, there was not a single book until now that shows you how to engage employees in bottom-up innovation efforts. After hearing this question enough times, I decided I should write a book on this subject as my contribution to society.

What's next for you, Jag? Do you have plans for any more books or other projects?

I am passionate about humanity. My immediate goal is to spread the word so that more and more companies implement this program. Right now, I have no plans for writing another book, but life is an open road, and I am open to adventure.

Will you tell us about your website and what additional information we can find there about *The Bright Idea Box*?

You can find more information at http://TheBrightIdeaBox.com. You can visit my blog there, as well as find out about my latest speaking engagements, information about these ideas in the news, and of course, buy a copy of the book. I also welcome readers to drop me a line at Jag@IdeaEmployee.com.