



BUSINESS

BE A SMARTER MANAGER

Our columnist knows firsthand that employee problems are among the toughest issues entrepreneurs face. Shell help you understand why they happen, how to correct them—and how to protect your studio's profitability.

You started your business to have the freedom to be creative on your own terms, to be your own boss, to chart your own destiny. Freedom was a big part of it; control was another. You imagined your business growing steadily and affording you the luxury to call your own shots, come and go as you please, indulge your interests and make lots of money. You imagined bright, passionate, loyal employees rolling up their sleeves alongside you, helping to make all your dreams come true.

Yeah, right.

Most small-business owners don't experience this; in fact, many have nightmare stories that reveal managing employees as one of the biggest problems in business today, and one of the things that will kill your profits fast if you don't know how to deal with it. When you started hiring employees, you became a manager—something you probably hadn't studied for. And things aren't going quite the way you had imagined, are they? Maybe you have constant turnover; you hire and

YOU MIGHT HAVE AN EMPLOYEE PROBLEM IF...

Does this sound like you?

You hired employees to grow the business, but the employees consume so much of your workday that you have no time to work on your business.

You have a staff revolving door: As soon as you've trained someone well, they leave to join another company. And often, these are your star employees.

You have diva employees, and you have to give them special perks to keep them happy.

Your top employees know who's not pulling their weight and who's breaking the rules, and they resent you for not dealing with the slackers.

You feel like your staff is a burden, a necessary evil. Sometimes it would just be easier to do it all yourself!

You know you have staff problems but you just ignore them. Maybe they'll go away.

train a talented designer only to watch her leave for a better gig. Maybe it's a diva, a staffer you cave in to in order to keep him happy. Maybe you're ignoring your employee issues, hoping people will grow up and deal with those problems themselves.

If you have any of these scenarios, you're not just going crazy, you're losing money. How much would it be worth to you if you could use the hours you spend on employee problems building your business instead? Do the math. Depressing, isn't it? But you're not alone. I've been there. Most entrepreneurs have been there, in fact.

I didn't always know how to engage and retain employees, how to turn them into assets that make my company more profitable—what's more, it didn't come naturally to me.

I developed my team the hard way, by making lots of mistakes in running my Toledo, OH-based design firm. I knew I couldn't build a good business doing all of the work myself. So I worked at it. I studied what other people were doing. I read a lot. I got a lot of advice. I hired coaches and we hosted team-building retreats and exercises. I asked my employees what they needed—more important, I listened to the answers. I was open to change for the sake of my business, and you can be, too.

3 PROBLEM AREAS

If you're having a problem retaining and engaging good

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employees, you're probably⁷ making at least one of these three mistakes:

1. You're working too hard.
2. You're not clear about your expectations.
3. You haven't asked the right questions or listened well enough to the answers.

MISTAKE #1 You're working too hard.

FIX You've got to let go.

I'm a designer, so I know how dillieull this is for creative people. I had to let go of the idea that I was the only person who could handle the important work in my company—that I was the only person clients would be willing to meet with, that I was the only person who could come up with good ideas, that I was the only person capable of making decisions. I had to come to the realization that if every important thing had to be done by me, my business wasn't going to grow, my people weren't going to grow, and I was going to be very, very tired.

Letting go is very difficult. It's also very necessary. Put yourself in your employees' shoes for a moment: You just got a great job at a great company, and you're really excited going in. You see some fantastic design work for cool clients and can't wait to be a part of it. Then you find out that it doesn't actually work that way. It's a small shop, so the owner makes most of the decisions. Client strategy? The owner sets strategy. Creative direction? Well, that's mostly the owner, too. Design? If she doesn't actually do it herself, she directs it—or she picks it apart. Copy direction? You guessed it: the owner. Hmm ... not much for you to dig your teeth into here, is there? Not much to be passionate about, either. You might think about moving on or just biding your time.

Now consider your own situation: You've got to stop working so hard. You've got to let go and let others grow into their capabilities. You've got to let them do the difficult, important work, too. They'll become engaged, and you can move on to other things. Sure, you still have to keep your eye on the ball, you still have to guide and direct, but they'll be constantly growing to take on more and more, with your approval. And, if you do it right, the results will surprise and delight you.

MISTAKE #2 You're unclear about your expectations.

FIX You need an internal communications plan.

It doesn't have to be a detailed plan, it just has to be a plan. And you need to communicate it to your staff so they know what to expect.

Employees want direction and regular feedback. They want to know your philosophy and the direction the business is going, they want to know what they're working toward, and they need to know how they fit into the plan.

You wouldn't be an entrepreneur if you didn't have your head in the clouds, so your employees expect you to be a bit different, a bit unpredictable. But you're their boss and they look to you for direction, and it can be frustrating for them if you leave them on their own too much, which is something a lot of business owners (myself included) do. It's tempting to just hire



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someone good and let them do their thing—just cross that "to do" item off of your list and move on. But that doesn't help you build a great team.

A well-defined program of employee communication is a must for every company, even if you only have one employee. Your internal communications plan needs to include ongoing touch points, and they can be pretty simple. The key is that they happen regularly and that the staff knows what to expect. Here are some suggestions for your plan;

- Company philosophy communicated at candidate interviews and often throughout the year
- Production meetings to review current workload
- Staff meetings to review internal issues
- Training/team-building meetings
- Management meetings
- "Lunch with the boss"—individual, non-project related conversations out of the office

- Ongoing compliments about staff members to others, in their presence
- Occasional notes or e-mails to staff members reinforcing something positive.

MISTAKE #3 You haven't asked the right questions or listened well enough to the answers.

FIX Ask your employees what they want. Then listen to and act on the answers.

This is just as simple as it sounds. Asking people outright what motivates them, what they need to have in order to feel supported in their work and what they expect from you, will give you the answers you need to be a better manager.

You may be surprised. They may want less, or something entirely different, than what you think. And the fact that you ask, if you're sincere, will give them pause—because most of them haven't been asked these questions by a boss before. They'll give you great answers.

The benefits of asking employees what they want are twofold: One, they respect you more for asking, and two, you don't have to guess what they want. Here's an example; An owner of a staffing firm asked her top salesperson, who she thought was motivated by money, what he wanted. He was such a great performer; she wanted to give him a big cash bonus. He told her he wanted a parking spot near the door with a "#1 Salesperson" sign on it. That was all he really wanted—to be recognized. She got him the spot that same day.

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Over the years, I've found that some of my employees want more money. Some want more (or less.) responsibility. Some want more recognition. Some want to job share, work part time at home, come in late, have their desk moved, even start a branch office in Arizona (it was a great idea and we went with it). I've had employees take advantage of me, and I've turned down a few requests. But I've had more wins than losses.

Don't guess what it takes to motivate your employees, or what it would take for them to be more passionate about their jobs. Ask your employees what they want and then act on the answers.

THE BENEFITS TO YOU

Empowered employees—those who feel that you're giving them the opportunity to do their best work and the responsibility for making themselves, the client and the business (instead of just you) look good—will take ownership of their involvement in your business and be more likely to stick around. Employees who understand how their jobs impact the organization and who get regular feedback and direction will motivate themselves to excel. And employees who feel heard and listened to by their employers will be thoughtful, careful and respectful of the needs of the organization in their requests. They'll work hard for the opportunity to be part of a workplace that has meaning to them.

During the last several years, I've identified three major benefits of being a better manager:

- My employee problems finally went away (almost entirely).
- My money flow increased (almost magically).
- My employees support me.

Now, my team lifts me up so I can do what I opened my business to do in the first place: I have the freedom to be creative on my own terms. I have the luxury to call my own shots, I come and go as I please, I indulge my interests and I make more money. I have bright, passionate, loyal employees rolling up their sleeves alongside me (and alongside each other, without me), helping to make all my dreams come true.

Marcia Hoeck is president of Hoeck Associates Inc. She's been helping clients connect emotionally with their customers since 1984. Get her special report, "From Problem Team to Money-Making Machine: How to turn your existing staff into a successful team that makes your business more profitable and frees you to do what you started your business for in the first place," at www.moneyrakingdreamteam.com. www.hoeck.net

Ask employees
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