

SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT



Joelle Steele

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by Joelle Steele

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Build A Strong Foundation

Structure is important to employees and employers alike. You wouldn't build a house without pouring a concrete foundation and erecting a sturdy wooden framing. Your business should be constructed just as carefully, and structure provides the framework that is needed to help everyone be their most efficient and productive selves. The personnel structure of a business, regardless of its size and the number of employees, includes personnel policies, procedural methods, job descriptions, chains of command, career paths and means of advancement, and the role of the employee in the company's goals.

When a company, particularly a small business, is lacking a cohesive structure, there is an enormous amount of inconsistency throughout the employment ranks. The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing at any given time. Everyone more or less does his or her own thing, in his or her own way, often feeling alone and isolated, and not an integral or important member of the company as a whole. Problem solving is often overlooked in these situations and the seeds of major financial catastrophes are being sown in every nook and cranny.

Some examples of the kinds of symptoms that evidence a lack of structure include: ongoing plant replacements due to inability to pinpoint the cause of the losses; insufficient documentation of maintenance services rendered due to either lack of time, lack of forms, illiteracy, inadequate training, or a combination of any of the preceding; high absenteeism and tardiness due to lack of effective disciplinary measures; and, low morale with high turnover in the workforce due to either confusion and disagreements regarding job duties, conflicting directions from superiors, or oral misrepresentations of benefits or other forms of company compensations.

Establishing a structure is best done before employees are hired and it usually solves a multitude of problems long before they

begin. Most importantly, it limits the degree of turnover since most employees respond in a very positive manner to working within a somewhat predictable, standardized environment. It gives them something on which they can depend and rely. The only surprises become those that they can enjoy and look forward to, such as an unscheduled company picnic or a tidy little bonus in their December paychecks.

Reduce Turnover Through Effective Hiring

To keep an employee happy and productive, even the smallest of companies must pay decent wages, offer incentives, create career paths, and treat employees with respect. But, what happens when your company offers all of these things and still cannot seem to keep an employee more than a few weeks?

When an employee leaves after only a few weeks it is not usually due to on-the-job problems per se. Those commonly occur after a few months or more of employment. When employees leave while still in training or before they even have a chance to get their feet wet, it is most often a result of faulty hiring practices – the wrong person for the job or the wrong person for the company.

You can reduce and altogether avoid unnecessary employee turnover by instituting sound and effective hiring practices. You can hire the right employee by utilizing proper hiring tools such as employment applications, proficiency tests, and well-written job descriptions; by taking the time to thoroughly evaluate and define your employment needs; and by carefully screening, interviewing, and verifying references.

Define The Position

Before you begin running help wanted ads and interviewing applicants, be sure that you know exactly what the job position

entails, especially if this is the first employee you are hiring or if it is a brand new position. Write a detailed job description. You may know what you want, but until you actually sit down and define it in writing, it will be nothing more than a nebulous idea subject to the interpretation of the next employee who fills it. If you want to be sure that an employee lives up to your expectations, be sure that you both know exactly what you want and expect in writing.

A job description should include the job title, the position relative to the rest of the company, experience and education necessary for the job, possible career paths for advancement, on-the-job training periods, desirable personality traits and characteristics (e.g., people skills, the ability to work unsupervised, an eye for aesthetic detail, etc.), the job duties and responsibilities, and a stated job purpose (e.g., to supervise ten people; to maintain the computer systems; or to sell a minimum of \$250K yearly).

Respondents to help-wanted ads should be screened and interviewed based on the job description. Applicants should be allowed adequate time to read the job description before they fill out an application or are interviewed. This will save you time and money, particularly when filling a trainee position. Would-be trainees with no professional experience will quickly find out what the job is all about.

Find Qualified Employees

With unemployment figures ever fluctuating – more often than not, skyrocketing – it seems like eager employment candidates should be breaking down your door, begging for a job – any job. But, finding employees – good ones – is just as difficult as ever.

To find a good employee, it is necessary to exercise every option:

- Referrals. Ask your best employees if they know anyone who may be qualified to fill your opening.
- Cold-callers. Keep lists of all the people who called you looking for work when you did not have an opening and call them back.

- Colleges. Contact placement centers and advertise for whatever major field will best suit your needs.
- Publications. Run classified ads in local or national publications, and, of course, your local newspaper.
- Other. If your neighborhood has any kind of employment referral service or job agency, you may wish to contact them too.

Help Wanted Advertising

Help-wanted ads can be simple or detailed, as long as you remember that what you say will determine the response just as well as what you do not say. Some companies run vague, general ads resulting in lots of calls that waste valuable time as you or your staff screen out the many unqualified and undesirable job candidates.

Ads for a trainee are usually the hardest to word properly when they are going into a general interest publication such as a newspaper. If a would-be trainee does not know what a marketing person does, or if it's a bit more detailed, such as tech marketing trainee, you will probably get a better response.

Wherever you place your ad, minimize the time spent in screening by stating the most rigid requirements – those things you absolutely must have, no matter what. For example, if your trainee must have a reliable car or proof of a clean driving record, say so. If you need a secretary who is bondable or proficient in the use of your software, say so. Why waste your valuable time talking to people who have DUI's and criminal records, or don't know a CPU from a VCR?

On the whole, most help-wanted advertisements should include the job title, the location of the job, the starting pay, and any other benefits, in addition to the requirements of the position itself.

Employment Applications

Applications are valuable hiring tools which have a number of uses aside from the most obvious items, such as work experience and educational background. A properly designed application includes other data which can be evaluated to detect other useful information about job candidates.

Among the basic items which should be included on an application are the usual personal data such as full name, home address, phone number, and email address, where the applicant can be reached. There should also be room for educational background, other specialized training, professional affiliations, awards or citations, hobbies and interests, a statement authorizing verification of the information as stated, and a signature attesting to that authorization.

When it comes to work experience, request only the last three or four employers and leave only room for that number of employers with adequate spaces for the employment periods, job titles, company names, addresses, phone numbers, job duties, and any other information you want to be able to verify. If the individual is a "job-hopper" it will be evident by the length of their employment with each individual employer and with all of them as a whole.

Another item which can be helpful is to request a written statement of the applicant's job or career goals in twenty-five words or more, not less. This will give you some idea as to how serious individuals are about their work and careers in general, how well they will fit into your company's master plan, and how well you can meet their future needs. As an added bonus, written statements of this sort give you an opportunity to see just how literate the applicant is. With names and dates many can get by with a rudimentary knowledge of English. But, when they have to compose sentences, the truth of their educational deficiencies is often revealed. If the position for which you are hiring requires good English skills and legible writing, this item is a must.

Qualifying Respondents

When the ads are running and the calls start coming in, somebody has to qualify the respondents to those ads. If you only have voice mail for a receptionist, you will have to call people back and verify that they meet the qualifications as stated in the ad, plus any additional lesser requirements which were not included in the ad. However, if you have a real, live person who is going to be screening the calls and scheduling the interviews, that individual should have a detailed list of questions typed out and sitting in front of them to go through with every respondent.

Regardless of how detailed your advertisement is, verify every item that is listed in the ad. If it says they must have a clean driving record, ask them, "Can you bring proof of a clean driving record to the interview?" Never ask, "Do you have a clean driving record?" Any driver with a revoked license can lie and say "yes" to that question on the off chance that you will not verify the information. You must make it crystal clear that you want to see their driving record before you make a hiring decision. The same goes for the use of Word or any other software in which you require fluency. Ask, "What version of Word have you used?" or tell the applicant that they will be required to take a proficiency test in the use of Word. Do not ask, "Are you fluent in Word?" Some people are desperate enough to say they can do something that they can't, hoping they will be able to bluff their way through it once they are hired.

Applicants will often have questions about things that are not stated in the ad such as where the job is located, what the rate of pay is, what kind of benefits you offer, when the position starts, how big the company is, etc. Whoever is screening the calls should be prepared with answers to these and any other possible questions that are commonly asked by job seekers.

Where To Interview

Interviews should always be held in a very quiet, private place, well out of the way of other people and interruptions. Applicants are often nervous and anxious and their comfort and yours are important in easing these tensions enough to allow open communication.

With a small business it is often difficult to find a comfortable and private place in which to hold an interview. Some companies have everyone working in the same general area without benefit of private offices or partitioned work areas. If your company is home-based, you may already be pressed for office space and you would probably prefer not to have a long line of strangers parading through your living room.

When space and privacy are at a premium on the premises, and you absolutely cannot find a place to hold interviews, you may want to conduct them in a neighboring office of a business friend or acquaintance, or you may opt for a nearby coffee shop, preferably one that is clean and hospitable, and within a block of your office. If you choose the latter, pick a booth or table that is out of the way of traffic to minimize the noise and interruptions. There are distractions in such places, but they are usually the kind that both parties are accustomed to, as we can presume almost everybody has been in a restaurant before.

Scheduling Interviews

Once a respondent is qualified as a potential candidate for the position, an interview must be scheduled. If the candidate is working, they will probably request an evening interview. Be as flexible as possible in scheduling interviews and always leave enough time for them to fill out the application, take any tests you require, and sit through the interview itself. You should have a rough idea of how long this entire process takes so that you can space the inter-

views when they are back-to-back. The job candidate should also be informed of how long the process will take so that they can plan their activities around it.

Remember that this is a first interview only and it should be scheduled for, or run, no longer than thirty minutes. If you really like the person you can and should bring them in for a second interview before making your final hiring decision. Be sure to get the applicant's name and phone number so that you can confirm the interview the day before it is scheduled. Some people are very inconsiderate and do not bother to cancel an interview when they get another job. Since you are probably very busy, there is not much sense in wasting your time waiting for a "no-show" when a confirmation call the evening before or the morning of the interview day would allow you to reschedule your day if necessary.

Pre-Interview Behavior

From the moment an applicant steps through your door, they should be evaluated for their pre-interview behavior. Whether you do the evaluating or have one of your employees do it, you should make a list of items that you want to evaluate. For example, a client of mine has a detailed checklist he has his secretary attach to each completed application before he meets the applicant.

It is during the pre-interview time, while the job candidate is filling out their application, taking tests, etc., that you can observe them without them knowing it. One of the most important items for most employers is punctuality. Employment candidates who arrive late to interviews often lose the job before they write their name on the application. An individual who wants to work will show up five minutes early or "on the dot."

How quickly does an employee work? Watch them fill out the application or take the test. Applications should go very quickly. It is all personal information that they should already know from memory or that they should have written down beforehand and

brought with them. With the exception of the career goals section, the application should be completed in under ten minutes. As for any tests you administer, you should have a pretty clear idea in advance as to just how long it takes to complete them. You can gauge the applicant's efficiency at test-taking accordingly.

Some other basic things to look for during this period are the manner in which the applicant greets you or your secretary. A pleasant "hello," a friendly, outgoing manner, and a well-groomed, professional appearance, even for the lowliest of labor jobs, are usually positive indicators of the importance the individual puts on obtaining work. Of course, you cannot use these as the sole factors in assessing a person as a worker. But, your observations of the individual, in combination with their test results, their application data, and your dialogue during the interview, will provide a more complete picture of this potential employee.

Reviewing Applications

Before you interview an applicant, set aside a few minutes to review and evaluate their application. Even if they bring a resume, have them fill out an application. Applications cannot be faked because the individual has to fill them out on the spot. If the person is illiterate they can still have a resume typed and printed for them, and if their writing is illegible it won't show up on a resume.

The application contains an enormous amount of information exclusive of the facts and data it includes. For example, the manner in which the form is filled out can tell you whether the applicant is attentive to detail (all spaces are filled out, words spelled out completely), if they are neat (no scratching out, blobs of ink, or erasures), if they have an aesthetic sense (neatly formed, legible letters aligned within the spaces allotted), or if they are reasonably literate (words spelled properly, grammatically correct sentences).

As for the evaluation of the data, look closely at their previous employment history. Have they hopped around from one industry

to another with no apparent direction? Did they stay with their employers for more than a year at a time? Did they advance into more responsible jobs from lower level positions? Do they have a history of leaving one employer for a higher level position with another? Are there any unexplained gaps or omissions in their work history? Do you see any transferable skills from previously-held positions which are different from the job for which they are applying with your company?

Make a big red check mark or an "x" next to anything that you want to be sure to ask about when you meet the applicant, and make a list of any items on which you would like additional information or clarification. Once you have examined the application in full you are ready to meet the applicant face to face.

Initial Interviews

Interviews should be conducted as professionally as any other business meeting, and the first or initial interview should be kept as brief and concise as possible. As an employer, you should treat the applicant with the same professional respect you would give any business acquaintance. Hold all your calls and be sure that any employees you have do not interrupt you. Give your undivided attention to the applicant, shake hands, and greet them cordially. Avoid being too chummy or joking around, etc. The interview is where you establish your position of authority. If you do not conduct yourself professionally, you may give the applicant the wrong impression and wind up either blowing the interview entirely, or hiring someone who is later uncomfortable with you as a superior.

There is a tendency for many employers to begin an interview by pitching their company, their industry, and the job to every applicant who walks through the door. This is usually a waste of time if it is the first thing you do. Save your big sales pitch until you know whether or not you want this person on your staff. The

correct way to begin an interview is to get right down to business and begin verifying the information on the application and asking any questions you have. This means that instead of doing all the talking, you will be doing all the listening.

There is always more to what people say than what their actual words are on the surface. When they are giving you facts, do your best to read between the lines. Listen for statements that indicate sincerity, goal orientation, desire for advancement, becoming easily bored, enjoying working with people, enthusiasm, positive/negative attitudes, respect for authority as well as for co-workers and clients, or laziness.

Never assume that what is on the application or resume is 100% accurate. Ask direct and specific questions about the applicant's schooling and their work experience to verify and fill in as much detail as you can about them. Ask open-ended questions and avoid yes/no questions. Ask questions that indicate how the applicant feels about people and about work in general. If they gossip or speak ill of their previous employer they may be too loose-lipped to make a good employee. If they do not talk at all or if they appear sullen and uncommunicative, they may lack the social skills that will enable them to work well with others. These are only indicators of possible problems. The applicant could just be nervous which is why a second interview is always recommended once you establish that you like this person and are seriously considering them for the position.

If you suspect that the applicant is nervous you can use body language to make them feel more at ease. This is done by matching body movements. For example, if the applicant leans forward, you lean forward. If they cross their arms, you cross yours. If they smile, you smile back, etc. Some people do this automatically and unconsciously so don't be surprised if an applicant turns the tables on you and mimics your body language!

Body language is a good assessment tool. Most people are aware of common body language movements such as eye contact, crossing

arms and legs, leaning forward, slouching, etc. Ideal body language for a job applicant is both feet on the ground, good straight posture with the body leaning forward slightly, maintenance of regular eye contact, smiles at the appropriate times, and hands in the lap. But, ideal is not always real and people are distinctly individual in their body language. There are also a wide variety of known cultural differences between different ethnic groups. However, most of these have become highly stereotypical. After all, not all people of Hispanic origin sit with their legs apart and their hands neatly folded between their knees, and not all people of African ancestry go out of their way to avoid eye contact. If you see these forms of body language in people of those ancestries it may be cultural, but it may just as easily not be.

If the interview has gone well and you have asked all your questions, you are now free to sell the employee on how great your company is. When you are through with your speech, ask the employee if they have any questions and answer them as honestly as you can. Always avoid the temptation to hire on the spot, no matter how great you think they are or how strongly you believe that they are right for the job. End the interview by thanking the applicant for coming by and tell them that you will get back to them by a certain day, usually in a couple days at the very latest.

Checking References

When my client Roy interviewed a bright, outgoing young woman named Gail to fill his very first maintenance position opening, he was impressed and overwhelmed by her experience and educational background. He saw her as an answer to every employer's dreams. He had visions of her training all his future employees. When he expressed concern about the recent year and a half during which she was not working, she offered him an explanation which he found to be satisfactory. Roy hired Gail. She

stayed on the job for four months. After her departure Roy found out through the grapevine that she had been employed by four other companies during the time she was supposedly not working. She had not stayed with any of them for more than five months, had always left without notice, and was described by two of her previous employers as extremely difficult to work with.

Many employers, and people in general, want to believe the best about others, and there is a tendency to believe what is written. But, when it comes to applications and resumes, it pays to be just skeptical enough to dig a little deeper during the interview and afterwards. Always contact previous employers and educational institutions. Verify that the employment periods, salaries, and position titles were exactly as stated on the application. Verify that colleges were attended and/or degrees were received, if possible.

Remember that a former employer cannot legally give you any other information other than what is allowed by your state and federal laws. In most cases this amounts to a verification that the employee worked for a company during a particular period of time, in a particular position, for a stated rate of pay. If a previous employer volunteers any additional information it may or may not be accurate, and is frequently nothing more than highly subjective at best. For example, just because an employer did not get along with an employee does not mean that you will have the same problem. The important thing with checking references is to verify that the applicant did not invent their own work history. Like everything else you do when evaluating an individual, take the whole body of information into consideration before making your hiring decision.

Second Interviews

When you have settled on a few "hot" applicants, it is time to bring them in for a second interview. These second looks allow you to ask any last minute questions you may have thought of

since you last saw the applicant. You will also have an opportunity to re-evaluate them in comparison or contrast with other applicants who are being interviewed for a second time. This time around, they will be a little more relaxed and probably more open. Use the same evaluation techniques as during the initial interview and see if your first impressions are the same.

The second interview is the time to "talk turkey:" salary, benefits, health plans, auto reimbursements, profit sharing, pension plans, etc. All of these items and others like them should be discussed in detail so that the employee understands exactly what you are offering and will be in a position to make an educated decision should you ultimately offer them the job.

In the end, you must listen to your "gut" feelings and instincts. They are usually right to some degree. Even if your head says that a person's qualifications are wonderful, your gut may be telling you that you just don't feel good about that person as an employee. You may simply feel that they will not "fit" with you or your other employees. The more you come to rely on your instincts in combination with the facts under your nose, the better you will become at evaluating and summing up the character of an individual.

Special Hiring Situations

There are a variety of questions that I am asked over and over again about who to hire and what is best to do under certain hiring conditions. The following are some of these special hiring situations.

I am often asked who to hire as a first employee. This is dependent on the owner's weaknesses or shortcomings. If, as an owner, you are a great salesperson but are lousy at bookkeeping and office skills, then hire a qualified bookkeeper with secretarial ability. If you hate sales and love administrative details, hire a salesperson. If you like sales and want to expand the business, hire an assistant salesperson, possibly part-time.

Many times the first employee will be part-time. You should be aware that what frequently happens is that when your time is freed and you are able to concentrate on sales or other aspects of your business, or your part-time salesperson is bringing in work on a regular basis, your business may begin to grow very rapidly. Sometimes it grows so fast that you are unable to manage it properly and need your part-time employee to become full-time. If that employee only wants part-time work you may be faced with hiring another part-time employee or firing the existing one and hiring a full-time employee.

Before you hire your first employee, make sure that you know where the business is headed and where you want it to go. Be sure that hiring a part-time office worker is really what you need in the long run. If you only think you need that person when what you really need is another salesperson, then you could be making a costly mistake.

Is it better to hire a trainee or an experienced worker? Depends. Do you have the time and knowledge to adequately train someone or do you have a fully qualified trainer? If so, then hiring a trainee is fine. If you lack the facilities for such in-depth training, however, do not get the idea that you are off the hook training-wise. Even skilled workers need to be trained in the way you want things done and the way your company runs. Be prepared to spend at least a week training even the most experienced worker.

Another question, similar to the last one is, is it better to hire an experienced worker with little to no experience in your field? Again, it depends on what you need. A degree is certainly a plus, but a degree alone is never a true indication of a person's value as an employee. What if they have a degree but do not work well with people? Service is more of a "people" job. As for the experienced maintenance worker with no degree, it would depend on what their experience consisted of. Were they properly trained or haphazardly trained? A little knowledge is a dangerous thing and some "experienced" workers know relatively little considering how long they have held their positions.

Should you hire an experienced salesperson? That depends on what you really need. Sales is sales and most salespeople are used to learning a new trade or product line. If you take the time to train them, they will learn yours.

Do you want a general manager with a degree in business or a degree in political science? The position of general manager, like that of a salesperson, is basically the same from one company to the next. A degree in political science will not prepare a general manager for the duties of that job. A business degree will. A bright executive will take the time to learn everything he or she can about your business so that they can communicate effectively with your employees while making intelligent decisions about managing and directing the activities of your company.

Hobbies and Other Interests

Some companies believe that there is no need for hobbies and special interests on an employment application. But, this personal information can be highly revealing of the kind of employee the applicant will make. Here are only a few examples of what some hobbies and special interests can say about people:

- Creative. Drawing, architecture, writing.
- Detail-minded. Model building, photography.
- Team player. Baseball, volleyball, football.
- Loner. Writing, needlework, reading, gardening.
- Sedentary. Reading, movies, needlework.
- Competitive. Team sports, tennis or squash, marathon running.
- Literate. Reading, writing, computer programming.
- Sociable. Card and board games, team sports, camping, cooking.
- Risk-taker. Sky diving, bungee jumping, surfing, motorcycling.

Most people cannot be classified as a loner solely on the basis of their enjoyment of reading, sewing, or gardening. Even if they sew quilts, they might be doing it with other people; they might enjoy gardening with their entire family. In those cases, their

loner activities become team efforts. True loner interests may also be balanced out with social or team activities. And, some hobbies fall into more than one category, such as model-building, a sedentary, creative interest, requiring attention to detail. A healthy mix of hobbies and interests usually makes for a well-rounded individual who is flexible and capable in a variety of ways.

The absence of hobbies or special interests can be a warning signal of psychological problems, particularly severe depression, alcoholism, and drug-dependency. A lack of stimulating and enjoyable activity is only one of the symptoms of these disorders, however, so it pays to ask questions and make sure that the job candidate did not just forget to fill out that section of the application.

Competency Testing

Determining competency is a precursor to any training program, whether you are hiring a trainee or an experienced worker. Ideally, it should take place as part of the hiring process, during the screening phase prior to the initial interview.

Some things, such as the presence of non-teachable skills or abilities, can be screened over the phone. For example, when screening for any service-oriented job, a pleasant and outgoing personality is a must. A knowledge of the city would also be helpful for learning a route. And, you can ask a prospective employee if they would be able to pass a basic literacy test which you would administer prior to the interview.

Once an applicant is in your office, you can administer basic literacy tests that determine an employee's ability to read and write and do some rudimentary arithmetical calculations. From that point on, the types of competency tests you require will be determined by the position to be filled. A secretary would take a typing test, a bookkeeper an accounting test, a manager a supervisory test, etc. The results of the tests will show you where the greatest skills are based and where weaknesses, those areas which will require training, are located.

Training Manuals

Every company needs a written training manual which includes within it a series of procedural manuals for each individual position. It does not have to be a fancy manual or even a very long one, but it should definitely be in writing so that it can be referred to – and often. Manuals come in many shapes and styles. Some are neatly printed out, others are hand-written. Some include clippings from articles in trade journals and others contain notes or tape transcriptions from classes and seminars. What's important is that they contain useful information in a format that is readily available to anyone who reads them.

Training Programs

Training is your company's greatest and most important investment. One of the first calls I ever received when I first started consulting came from a contractor who was angry and frustrated with her newly hired maintenance person: "I hired her because she has six years of experience, but she never seems to know what to do. She comes to me for everything. If I'd wanted a trainee I would have hired one!"

I can't recall how many similar calls I received in the years that followed. Most came from owner-operated, one-person companies who were hiring their first employee, but many came from well-established businesses. And, the problem was not solely limited to the problems of hiring skilled versus trainees. On the contrary, the same problem came up time and time again in relation to office managers, sales people, general managers, secretaries, delivery personnel, etc. Clearly, this is a common problem for many employers.

But, what exactly is the problem? Employees who have misrepresented their abilities and skills to their new employers? A lot of

unskilled, incompetent workers? Workers who lack initiative? Employees who can't think on their feet? Poor judgment on the part of the employer during the interview process? What? The problem is training or, more specifically, a lack of training or inadequate training.

Every newly hired or newly promoted employee needs to be trained. Even the most highly-skilled, experienced new employee requires training. It is cost-effective in both the long and the short run of a business. And, it doesn't matter what level an employee is at in a company's hierarchy. All employees, from the ranks of the trainees all the way up the executive offices, require training to some degree or other.

If even an experienced employee requires training, why hire that person in the first place? Why not just save a few bucks and hire a low paid trainee? Because a worker with experience is still an asset and will usually require less training, or possibly less "in-depth" training than will a trainee. Training is not a cut-and-dried procedure that is the same for every employee.

For example, with an inexperienced worker, you have to teach them everything. It is a long process and they will still make many mistakes once they are flying solo. With an experienced worker, you must first determine what kind of training they require. Some experienced workers were trained in the basics, others got their training in the field, others are good at dealing with people, etc. Once you determine their level of competency, you can fill in their training gaps.

Training programs need to be regular and systematic. They also need to be interesting and, whenever possible, fun. In other words, the process of learning new material should be a positive experience. Training that is inconsistent and lacking in follow-through will result in high turnover in a position. The expense of such turnover could be more wisely invested in a better training program.

The initial training program is usually designed by the owner of a company. This is usually acceptable since he or she knows what an employee is expected to do and how it should be done.

For an owner who is not particularly skilled in educational applications, it is usually advisable to hire a consultant who specializes in training programs for the industry. They can design and write a customized training program that fits the owner's needs.

Comprehensive training programs include everything from the trade procedures themselves to the company policies and general procedures. This means training in the company's basic procedures, safety measures, paperwork, troubleshooting techniques, customer service, chain of command, employment policies, etc.

While most non-technical training programs last only a few days, horticultural service training programs can last anywhere from about two weeks (for a skilled employee), to as many as six or eight weeks (for a trainee). Some individuals will move through a program more quickly than others, and some will move quickly through some parts of the process and will be slower completing others.

Technical positions, like some of their non-technical counterparts, also require on-the-job training which is almost always ongoing in nature. This continuing training is necessary in order for a company to constantly maintain a staff which is fully competent, can work independently (though never unsupervised), and which keeps up with the latest technology and industry trends.

On-the-job training refers to the period of training during which the trainee first rides along with a trainer and observes, then works with the trainer, and finally works observed by the trainer until ready to solo. During the initial solo period, the trainer does regular spot checks to see how the trainee is coming along and attempts to stop any bad habits which may be developing and to remedy any mistakes which the trainee makes by retraining as necessary. After that, supervisors and quality control personnel take over to insure that the work is always being done properly and to the standards set by the company.

On-going training refers to educational processes which become necessary after an employee is initially trained. For example, when a company first decides to convert its software, there is a

good chance that many workers will require training in the use of the new system. That same program may then be incorporated into the initial training program to insure that all new trainees have the same information.

Training Techniques

Training takes many forms depending on what it is that you are trying to teach. With complex technical positions, a combination of many methods is usually recommended in order to produce the fastest and most comprehensive results with the widest range of trainee types.

In the long run, many companies fail to fully educate their technical staffs. Brief training periods which emphasize the "monkey-see-monkey-do" method and completely ignore or de-emphasize the written word, which usually results in trainees who think their new job is a snap. This is because the job is presented to them as being a relatively simple one. The trainee doesn't take the job seriously because it appears that there is so little to it since it can be learned in just a couple of weeks by merely watching someone else do it.

To eliminate this myth, other measures must be taken during the training process to emphasize the complexities of the position. Besides observing the work to be done, reading should be mandatory. The time trainees spend in acquiring this detailed knowledge is an investment in their careers, and that will benefit them, you, your company, and your industry in the long run. It's precious little to ask considering the long-term benefits.

Basic rudimentary knowledge acquired through reading should be supplemented with whatever visual aids are available. Audio and video presentations are available for a variety of job skills and are a worthwhile investment for any business.

When local colleges or adult schools offer classes that are appropriate to the needs of company personnel, they too are a worthy investment. If budget is a concern, send at least one person and have them tape the class or seminar for others to hear later. Don't

rely on their note-taking ability as it can be too subjective and sometimes inaccurate. It is preferable to send everyone concerned whenever possible.

One important training technique is the use of positive reinforcement or feedback. No matter what methods or systems of training you adopt, every trainee needs to know how they are doing while they are in the learning process and after the initial training stage when they are on the job. They need to have their good habits reinforced with praise for a job well done, and they need to be encouraged to try again when they fail. And, they need to have any special skills acknowledged, encouraged, and developed through additional training.

More Testing

In all stages of training, it is important for the trainer to know, for certain, that the trainee is actually learning the material. Of course, the trainer can ask the simple question, "Do you understand?" But, an equally simple answer of "Yes" does not mean much. Some people automatically say "yes" in order to avoid feeling stupid, particularly when they are asked in front of other trainees who appear to already know everything.

To verify that a trainee is getting the message loud and clear and to insure that the information is sinking in, there is really only one way to be sure: administer a test. Tests can be written, oral, or performance, preferably a combination of all three. It is not necessary to make tests so long that they are intimidating. This is not a high school test where a grade is important. The purpose here is to find out whether employees are learning and retaining information and to go back and retrain in the areas in which they are deficient.

Written exams or quizzes are good for the purposes of testing technical terminology. They should be a combination of true/false, multiple choice, fill-in, and short essay. Oral exams are good for

presenting hypothetical customer service problems for the trainee to solve. With the latter, the trainer can play the part of the client while listening to the way the trainee handles some of the more difficult aspects of a service job.

Performance exams are especially well-suited to assessing the ability of a trainee to perform such tasks as watering plants. For example, the trainer can ask the trainee to demonstrate what he or she looks for before applying water, how to test the soil, how to determine how much water a particular plant type requires under specific environmental conditions, and how the water is actually applied. The trainer can even determine whether a trainee is skilled in using a pressurized watering device, a particular subirrigation system, an automated irrigation timer, or whether they lift and bend safely to avoid on-the-job injuries.

Selecting A Trainer

When it's your first employee ever, you as the owner, are the trainer – like it or not, qualified or not. It's up to you to make training a priority and to make the time to do it. For most owner-operators, the *time* it takes to train is a far bigger issue than the *ability* to train.

Fortunately, for most employers, the first employee is usually a part-time one and is almost always an already experienced worker. For the most part, while half of your time will be devoted to training your new employee, the other half can be spent doing sales and administrative tasks. And, most experienced workers can at least help you while you teach them how you want things done.

If your company already has a few employees, you will eventually want to select and then train a trainer. Ideally speaking, the best person to be a trainer is the individual who is the most knowledgeable. But, being knowledgeable is not always an indication of teaching ability. You may have a lesser-skilled employee who is great at educating others. This is because teaching is a skill which not everyone possesses. You should look for the person who has teaching ability.

With the help of a manual, the skilled and even the not-so-skilled can become effective trainers. And, by emphasizing their strengths and giving them additional training in their weaker areas, you may end up with some very competent trainers. The important thing is to make sure that they have the ability to relay information and maintain a personal enthusiasm for their subject matter. If they are bored with the material, rest assured that their trainees will feel the same.

Train As If Your Life Depends On It

Your company's life certainly does. Training is the communicating of a substantial body of company and trade knowledge to an employee over an extended period of time, usually throughout the length of their employment. It is not, and should not be, limited to only a brief, initial teaching of a new worker. Training is one of the most important aspects of business communication because it sets the precedent for everything that follows during the work life of an employee. It must be thorough and ongoing for employee success.

Initial training periods are significant because they give an employer the opportunity to inform a new employee of exactly what is expected of him or her within the company and within the job in question. It is in this period that the employee learns the company's goals, how image is maintained, who does what, and who is in charge of what and whom. It is also the time during which all technical information is imparted.

When training is inadequate or incomplete, it is characterized by repetitive errors in the employee's technical and administrative judgment. Other symptoms include non-responsiveness to direction when an employee thinks the duties are easier than they really are or when they think they already know all there is to know about a particular aspect of a job. With initial training that is not followed up by ongoing training, promotion becomes next to

impossible and, as with inadequate or no training at all, the result is high turnover.

To insure that employees are not deficient in training, it is important to create a process that uses many of the teaching methods used in conventional classroom settings. You may be glad to be out of school and may not miss the cramped little desks and the screech of chalk across the blackboard. But, when you have a small business, you have to be the first company teacher whether you like it or not. You need to write a standardized training program outlining all of the items to be covered complete with reading assignments, written and oral quizzes and tests, and performance evaluations. Never make the assumption that hiring only experienced maintenance people, secretaries, etc., will result in employees who know exactly what to do in every situation, making the same decisions you would make. They won't. You have to teach them.

Plan For The Future

Every company needs goals and so do its employees. Would you board a train without knowing where it was headed? Employees need to know where your train is going. Knowing a company's goals gives employees a chance to share and participate in those goals for the ultimate benefit of the company. In addition, every employee has to feel there is something in it for them. Everyone wants and needs to know what they can expect from a company career-wise and if there is a future for them in it. And, if there is, how will that future manifest itself? In a bigger paycheck? With more challenges? In an executive position? In a creative position in design? In sales?

Companies which do not share their goals with their workforce and which do not establish goals for their employees are usually peopled with employees who don't care about their work, their jobs, their co-workers, clients, and employers. As far as they are

concerned, they are drawing a paycheck and this job is as good as any other. They often assume that the owner is making money hand-over-fist and that they'll never see any of it anyway. Morale is low and turnover is high, particularly in entry level positions.

To create employee success, make sure your company has goals, and then try to make them clear and concise so that you can pass them on to the workforce in a way that is meaningful to the workers. Keep them advised of those goals on a regular and constant basis, possibly by using slogans that are printed on labels and forms, even on the uniforms if applicable. Establish career paths for all jobs, complete with all the training, educational, and experiential steps necessary to advance within the company. Then, make sure that all the employees know that these avenues for advancement are open to them and what they need to do to move up the ladder. Even if you are very small with only one or two employees, it is important for those people to know where they are going. The smaller the business the more important it is to hang on to good employees, not lose them.

Inspire Success

Incentives are methods used to motivate people and make them want to be productive. Incentives come in many forms and consist of virtually anything that will accomplish that end. Every employee responds differently to incentives and what may work for one person may be completely unworkable for another. For example, if you have an employee who is money-oriented, he or she will likely produce the most when the incentive is a raise, a commission, a bonus, or even an increase in benefits. Employees who seek recognition and challenge will respond best to awards, promotions, and new or additional training and responsibilities.

Most jobs with inadequate incentives are perceived as dead-end, possibly boring positions, and absolutely nothing is worse than a non-motivated employee. When a person has no reason to

do a good job, they simply do not show up. Excessive tardiness and absenteeism are the most obvious symptoms of the non-motivated employee who obviously doesn't want to come to work. Theft, accidents, high losses, and both high client and high employee turnover are also symptomatic of the non-motivated workforce. These people know that a paycheck is simply not enough to make them go the extra distance that spells the difference between being merely a competent employee and being an outstanding asset to the company.

Incentives are a must for all positions. To determine just what makes an employee "shine" in their work requires an understanding of that individual and what is important to him or her. In general, there should be a variety of incentives available in a company, and they should be very clearly visible to all employees. To create a comprehensive incentive program, start by making all raises merit-based. Raising an employee just because they've been there for six months or a year may make them stay longer but it doesn't mean they will be productive, efficient, etc. Institute bonus programs and awards for jobs well done. Award or otherwise acknowledge employee suggestions that lead to increased profits or efficiency in the company. Hang employee of the month photos and certificates of merit on the office walls. Pay small commissions or referral fees to non-sales people who bring in sales leads that result in new clients. The field is wide open when it comes to finding ways to motivate with incentives.

Respect Your Employees

Respect is one of those intangible things that is so often overlooked when dealing with employees. Simply put, respect is the high regard in which an individual is held. It encompasses other related attitudes such as the acknowledgment of a job well done, giving credit where credit is due, and the acceptance of an employee as a fellow professional.

Like non-motivated workers, unrespected employees simply do not care about their jobs. They are the employees who start out enthusiastic and then "fade" with time as they just stop trying. Their own self-esteem is gradually lowered with time and in turn they show little regard for others – co-workers, employers, and clients alike. In many cases they express their anger and resentment openly, and in the worst case scenarios their actions may become spiteful or vengeful. An employee who is not treated with respect eventually becomes perceived as the "bad apple" and can be a real threat to an already sagging company morale.

A company in which the management does not respect the employees, or in which no one respects anyone, is a company that is destined for failure. It is very hard for an employee to earn respect or feel worthy of respect if the superiors look down their noses at him or her, usually based on their own previous negative experiences with other people in the same job position. It is doubly hard to break a cycle of mutual disrespect. Usually these negative relationships take a while to grow, and by the time they are discovered, morale is so low that neither side is capable of changing immediately. In the mean time, everything that could go wrong is going wrong and everyone is going around blaming each other.

To keep company morale high and everyone's self-esteem high, remember your own roots. Almost everyone starts out as someone else's employee. Remember what that was like. Remember how it felt to be taking directions instead of giving them. Remember how enthusiastic you were when you were first hired and how miserable you later became when your superiors ignored your hard work and your innovative ideas. Remember how embarrassed you were when your superiors treated you like the village idiot after you made a mistake. Remember how insecure you felt having to depend on someone else for a paycheck. Remember how lost you felt when you were trapped in the red tape of an insensitive and uncaring corporate bureaucracy and how you decided to start your own business to create a better life for yourself. Take the

time to share some of that better life with your employees. They'll thank you for it in ways you would never imagine possible.

Have Faith In Your Employees

Trust doesn't come easy for many employers. They've been burned before and they do not want it to happen again. Ever. But trust - that faith you have in others that they will do right by you - inevitably fosters employee loyalty, a trait which is priceless.

Small business employers who do not trust their employees have many of the symptoms already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, but there is one very specific characteristic which they almost always have in common: a flat management structure with no apparent chain of command. Everyone reports to one person and only that person for almost everything. That person is usually a very overworked, overburdened, stressed-out owner.

When an owner doesn't trust his or her employees, real delegation is completely impossible. Even the tiniest little decision is not left to an employee who might screw it up, forget about it, or make it in some way other than the way the owner would do it. Employees are treated like toddlers; training is a waste of time if anyone is being trained at all; no one is ever promoted because there are no intermediary positions between the owner and the workforce; and, the latter problem, the flat structure, prevents constructive company growth of any kind.

To establish trust, an employer must start by creating a training program that will thoroughly teach his or her methods and procedures exactly. Once the employee is properly trained the employer then needs to closely monitor the employee's progress and insure that he or she applies the training to the job at hand. When the employer has insured that the work is being done to his or her satisfaction, it is time to delegate additional responsibilities, and later, some real authority. With time and patience, trust is built. An otherwise skeptical employer can trust this employee

because he or she has adequately overseen the development of the employee to such a degree that the employee fully understands what is expected and is coming through.

Share The Workload

Give some responsibility to the people who work for you. They need it, they usually deserve it, and nine out of ten times, they want it but don't know how to ask for it. Delegation is not a convenience in small business; it's a necessity. No one person can do it all and do it all correctly. That's why employees are hired in the first place.

An employer who does not delegate is usually wearing many hats and working extremely long hours – and letting everyone know how much he or she is working. Employees who have questions or problems have to wait in line to see the boss and then he or she doesn't have enough time to fully address their concerns. Employees walk away feeling that they are not important and that the employer doesn't care. Eventually, the employees don't care either. A company with this sort of problem is characterized with the usual problems of turnover and high losses. In addition, the employees gossip and goof off a lot (remember, they have nothing better to do since they have so few duties, what with their boss doing all the work).

Not all employees have the same level of ability when it comes to accepting responsibility, but they should all be given as much as they can possibly handle. You are paying them to work for you. At least try to get the most for your money. Once you learn to share the workload, you will find that while your employees still work the same number of hours, your overtime will decrease substantially. In time you may even be able to take a vacation (you do remember what a vacation is, don't you?) without guilt or worry.

Make Employees Accountable

No employer wants to discipline an employee, a.k.a. another adult. Most parents seem to be able to discipline their children, but when it comes to enforcing rules in the workplace, employers frequently shrivel up and make excuses for their wayward employees rather than correcting them. How many times have I heard an employer complain about an employee who is always rude, tardy, incompetent, etc., without ever taking disciplinary measures? Too many times.

If you have rules and regulations, methods and procedures, and policies and systems in place, they are there for a reason. They were created to make your business run smoothly and if they are breached for any reason, you have to step in and make sure it doesn't happen again. Companies that establish rules but do not enforce them usually have employees who are taking advantage to the fullest extent. They may be overly tardy, absent, rude, lazy, incompetent, disrespectful, dishonest, deceitful, and anything else you can think of. Why not? No one does anything about their behavior and actions.

Lack of discipline can spell disaster for a small business that cannot afford to lose clients. Otherwise excellent employees fail to produce under the influence of the undisciplined "bad apple(s)." The few incorruptible employees will ultimately quit rather than be subjected to working with these individuals for co-workers. Eventually, most of the workforce will consist of "bad apples."

Employees need to understand and accept the consequences of their actions. This is simply part of being an adult. It is unfortunate that there are so many people out there over the age of 18 who still act like spoiled three-year-olds. But, that's life and that's employees – some of them anyway. If you end up with a problem employee you have two options: 1) terminate their employment, or 2) take corrective measures.

To insure that discipline is an effective process, without being an excuse to be mean or intimidating, make sure that everyone knows the rules your company plays by and what the consequences will be if those rules are broken. When an employee breaks one of those rules, immediately acknowledge the breach and document it in the employee's file, following it up with a written warning. If they break that rule again (or any rule for that matter), suspend them without pay for a day or two. When they return, put them on probation for thirty days. If they screw up again, terminate them immediately. It is really amazing how quickly a company can shape up its workforce, almost overnight, when disciplinary actions are actually carried out. It is unlikely that such occurrences will happen again.

Talk It Over

Good communication fosters understanding and agreement. We're talking about two-way communication here, not a non-stop lecturing tirade in which the employer badgers the employee who has heard it so many times before that it just goes in one ear and out the other. Communication means you talk, I listen, I talk, you listen. It also means making the effort to understand the other person's point of view in the process.

Communication exists in every aspect of a business, regardless of how small the company is. When communication is poor or nonexistent, it is not unusual to hear an employer remark, "I don't know why George quit," or "I don't know why that client canceled." The employer really doesn't know because nothing was ever properly communicated.

To encourage communication, make it a priority. It is usually the one thing that can correct a multitude of problems. Never make the assumption that because there are only three employees in your company that you are adequately communicating with all of them and that they are communicating well with each other or with clients.

Remember that communication must be oral and written. Document your important conversations with your employees and have them do the same with client records, telephone messages, etc. Have regular meetings to discuss, not lecture about, what's happening in a particular department, with a particular client, or in the company as a whole. When everyone understands what is going on, problems get solved and dollars are saved.

Relax

A sense of humor and a relaxed manner are essential to running any business and are invaluable in managing employees. Things do go wrong from time to time. Little things and big things. It's inevitable. If you can get in the habit of not taking yourself, your employees, or your company too seriously, it will be easier to see the humor in any given situation. It won't necessarily fix a problem, but it will certainly make the process a little more tolerable.

A company with no sense of humor is the kind of place where no one hangs their hat for very long. Everyone, the owner included, walks around with a dark cloud over their head. Employees are usually fearful of making the smallest error because they are so heavily scrutinized by the employer who seems to be anxiously waiting for the next big problem to rear its ugly head. And, when it does, watch out! Not only will the employee be chewed out, he or she will have to cope with a tense and irritable boss for days, maybe weeks to come. Morale is very, very low and there is no hope. Things are just so awful, so terrible.

If you're working up to an ulcer, remember, they're contagious. No, not physically of course, but psychologically. An employer's tense and anxious disposition permeates the workforce where the employees become equally tense and anxious and develop their own ulcers or other stress-related disorders. Or at least they do if they ever stick around longer than a few weeks. Learn to relax and to laugh at life. You'll be doing yourself and your employees a big

favor. Who knows, they might just decide you're not such a bad boss after all!

Recognizing An Employee's Problems

With even the best of training, problems can and do arise, and any employee-related problem, regardless of its source, can affect you and your business. Therefore, identifying and then solving these problems should be high priority.

Learning to recognize employee-related problems by their symptoms is the first step to solving them. Most symptoms can be grouped into three categories:

- attitudes and behavior
- job performance
- changes in attitude, behavior, or job performance

Attitudes and behavior are usually pretty easy to detect but are not always as easy to diagnose properly. For example, do you automatically assume that the employee who is always smiling, always on time, always willing to work late, and always eager to learn more, is a problem-free employee? If you do you could be very much mistaken. Not all employee-related problems are rooted in the negative behavior patterns of tardiness, high absenteeism, "bad" attitudes, or the inability to get along with co-workers. A seemingly model employee could be harboring a potentially serious problem. These "perfect" employees are often known to break down after falling victim to the "workaholic" syndrome.

Any excessive or extreme behavior, whether negative or positive, can be a cause for concern. And, most problems are characterized by a battery of symptoms and not just one lone indication such as tardiness. After all, a habitually late employee could just have problems getting up, could be fighting traffic, could have family obligations to overcome, etc. On the other hand, a habitually late employee who is also frequently absent from work, is sick on the job, has a know-it-all personality, has a hot temper, or is

highly critical of others, could be demonstrating symptoms of anything from low self-esteem to substance abuse to an eating disorder, or any number of problems begging for a solution.

Job performance characteristics offer other indications of potential problems. As with attitudes and behavior, the most careful, attentive, hard-working employee could still be a trouble source if their dedicated job performance is rooted in an obsessive or compulsive behavior which could result in job dissatisfaction or stress-related illness.

Other job performance problem indicators which usually command our immediate attention include sloppy and careless work habits, lack of preparedness or attention to detail, inability to follow directions, high losses, excessive client complaints, refusal to wear uniforms or conform to company rules and regulations, and not being where he/she is supposed to be at any given time. We always seem to note those symptoms as soon as an employee is on the job. But, we frequently feel helpless to correct the problem and inevitably end up firing the individual, assuming that we made a poor choice in hiring.

Changes in attitudes, behavior, or job performance are usually the easiest symptoms to spot. A "good" employee goes "bad" – often quite suddenly and unexpectedly, and usually with no apparent reason. For example, an employee who has always been reliable and meticulous in his/her work habits becomes irresponsible and careless. This change from one extreme to another in behavior or work style should send up a red flag to an employer, because it means that something has happened to effect that change.

Again, as with attitudes or behavior, any changes to extremes, good or bad, are symptoms of a problem. As with all employee-related problems, the cause could be something of a personal nature in the employee's life such as the death of a loved one, a troubled marriage, personal illness, or any number of other crises which face each of us at one time or another.

Identifying The Problem

When personal problems on the homefront affect an employee in the workplace, there is usually very little that an employer can do other than to be supportive and understanding, or possibly to extend some leave or vacation time. These kinds of problems are not within the realm of the employer's responsibility per se, and if they are not resolved by the employee within a reasonable period of time, termination may be the only practical business solution.

Employee problems which are a direct result of a work-related situation are the responsibility of the employer and should be attended to as soon as they are detected. Once an employer is aware of the various symptoms and the possible problems associated with them, it's time to play detective and identify the problem so that a solution can be determined and implemented at once. This calls for an open line of communication between the employer and the employee and is the second step in solving employee-related problems.

Regular meetings between the employer/supervisor and employee will usually prevent work-related problems before they ever have a chance to take root. But, if these meetings are not being held periodically, they must be held when a potential problem arises. Problems should be discussed in a private place, away from other co-workers. The employer should always lead the discussion by prefacing the reason for the meeting and what has been observed that has prompted it. It should not be assumed that because an employer observes symptoms of a problem that the employee will readily admit to a problem or want to talk about it, particularly if it is of a highly personal nature.

If the employee does not want to discuss the problem, the employer must then explain how the company handles the observed symptoms, in and of themselves, when a problem cannot be identified and solved. For example, if an employee is consis-

tently late and it is affecting the dispatching of workers each morning or is holding up a regularly scheduled staff meeting on a particular day, etc., the employer has a right to take disciplinary action such as suspension, even though the cause for the tardiness is unknown.

However, when a problem is clearly identified for what it is and not just as a collection of symptoms, the employer and the employee must both work together to determine the best solution.

Common Problems

Among the most common employee-related problems which come up again and again and give employers the most grief are five issues: wages, motivation, communication, training, and substance abuse. These have the potential to create widespread disturbance within a business and are within the range of the employer's control. Their symptoms may vary but most commonly resemble the following:

- Wage-related problems. Whether the pay scale is perceived as too high or too low, the results are similar. Wages that are too high or raises which are not merit-based usually result in under-motivation characterized by apathy, boredom, carelessness, disillusionment, and high turnover. When the wages are too low, or are perceived to be inadequate, the situation is pretty much the same except that employees are often angry and resentful as well, and their aggression may be deliberately turned on the employer or their co-workers in the form of rationalized in-house theft or "personality conflicts."

- Motivational problems. When an employee lacks the proper incentives, an enormous battery of symptoms may occur simultaneously. Excessive absenteeism, anger, apathy, boredom, carelessness, conflicts, disillusionment, envy, fear, chronic unidentifiable illness, resentment, tardiness, etc., all fall into the list of symptoms for this problem. Motivational problems are usually company-wide and are characterized by an underlying lack of team spirit

and company loyalty, which ultimately result in extremely high turnover, particularly among laborers.

- Communication problems. A company which has no open avenues of communication, one-way communication only, or no formal or informal communication process to follow, is usually an organization which is riddled with conflict and chaos. No one understands what their responsibilities are or what their co-workers, even their supervisors, are supposed to be doing. Only a handful of people seem to get along well at all, and rumors and gossip are the primary sources of information. Misunderstandings abound, the error factor runs high, and client and employee turnover are high.

- Training problems. These issues are closely related to communication problems. A company with training problems invariably has communication problems and vice versa. In companies with training problems, employees lack solid role models, receive minimal instruction, possess inadequate knowledge of their trade, lack goals and guidance, and have difficulty following the few meaningful directions they are given. In addition, there is rarely any follow-up training and quality control is of the hit-or-miss variety, if it exists at all. Losses and errors plague the business and both client and employee turnover are high.

- Substance abuse. It doesn't matter what the substance is that is being abused. Alcohol or drugs, even food addictions, can result in serious problems for a business. Substance abuse is usually characterized by erratic behavior and an almost total lack of responsibility. Sudden mood swings, tardiness, excessive absenteeism, chronic undefinable illness, and extreme sensitivity to criticism are all just about par for the course. Only rarely is substance abuse an employee-wide problem. Usually there are only one or two individuals. Unfortunately, those one or two individuals can do a significant amount of damage if their behavior is not halted through rehabilitation, termination, or both.

Problem Solving

Many employers believe the most common problems with employees are laziness, irresponsibility, bad attitudes, disobedience, etc. However, these problems, taken individually, are not generally considered to be within the employer's range of control, i.e., the only way these problems can be solved is if the employee is willing to modify his/her own behavior. Employers may attempt to force this behavior modification by providing incentives or enacting disciplinary measures but, in the end, such isolated bits of behavior are not governed by a personnel policy manual.

When an employee turns out to be difficult or impossible to work with, when every attempt at communication with the individual has been exercised, and when all possible solutions including counseling and disciplinary measures have met with failure, the only remaining alternative is termination. Keeping a "bad apple" on board can indeed spoil the whole bunch, so this process should be performed as quickly and efficiently as possible.

With the top five most common employee-related problems, solutions must be found and implemented and, whenever possible, put in place as a preparatory or preventive measure when personnel policies are first established. But, whether policies are created in advance or at the time a crisis arises, employers must always consider the needs of the company, those of the employees and, most importantly, what is right and just according to federal and state labor laws.

Wage-related problems can become the most heated issues since money is such an important survival issue for both the business and for the employee. Many of these money problems can be solved by establishing salary structures with monetary incentives based on merit.

Money problems do not usually occur when an employee is first hired. At that time, the rate of pay is agreed upon. But if a promise

is made, say, for a raise somewhere down the line and the reason for the raise is not clear, trouble could be brewing. What if the new employee is promised a raise in six months and thinks it is just a time-related raise? He/she may be upset at raise time upon discovering that the employer considers the raise to be conditional on the employee's performance during an unmentioned six-month probationary period.

One way to keep wage problems at bay is to define them down to the tiniest detail in the personnel policy manual and make certain they are in strict accordance with state and federal labor laws. For example, overtime pay is federally mandated and must be calculated correctly as stated in the federal and state labor laws. By not paying overtime, an employer not only breaks the law, but breaks the morale of the workforce as well.

That brings us back to the motivational problems. If there are no monetary or other forms of incentive programs inherent in a company, most employees will not motivate themselves. Again, the personnel policy manual should include as many kinds of incentives as possible. No two employees will be motivated by the exact same incentives or combination thereof. For example, if a worker is turned on by money, more money, and nothing but money, a recognition program that features an award plaque or their photograph hanging on the wall for a month will be worthless incentive-wise.

If, in spite of an employer's best efforts, an employee does not seem to be motivated, it is important to find out what kind of incentive will spur that individual into action. The employer will have to meet with the employee and ask him/her exactly what it is that he/she wants. An employee may simply say they want a raise. However, a straight raise is not always a motivating factor, particularly if it is so easily earned. This does not mean that employees should be made into drudges, but they should be given a reason to work and something to achieve as an end result of their efforts.

Getting an employee to communicate his/her needs is critical to solving employee-related problems, because the process of good communication will cause an outpouring of information that is essential to the development and implementation of a viable solution. Sometimes communication is thwarted by the lack of a known or accessible communication system.

For example, if an employee does not understand the company hierarchy and cannot communicate effectively with his/her immediate supervisor, to whom does that individual go to be heard? Not all employees are assertive or resourceful enough to solve this simple dilemma and may instead resort to whining and complaining to other employees, dragging their co-worker's morale down at the same time. These kinds of communication problems can be resolved by letting employees know who is in charge of who and what, and by allowing those workers the opportunity to be heard privately as well as in group situations.

Training should include information on the structure of the company and its policies so that employees will feel free to ask questions, express their opinions, and air their grievances in a healthy, constructive manner. The training period should also be used as a testing ground for new employees in order to discourage "bad apples" and encourage enthusiastic professionals. It is also the time to look for signs of substance abuse before any further investment in training or wages is made on the part of the company.

Since many training problems are related to communication problems, an employer can often solve both problems simultaneously provided that the training program exists in some consistent format. Choosing a qualified technical trainer is also an important step in solving problems in this area before they occur. The right trainer will provide an effective role model for workers. Follow-up in the form of additional training will insure against losses and will also provide ongoing motivation in the form of learning incentives, the latter being particularly effective when promotions are based on advanced skills.

The most important part of ongoing training exists in the form of quality control inspections. These are one of the best ways to stay on top of an employee's job performance and their attitudes and behavior, especially if they are out in the field. The quality control inspector often has the opportunity to interact with the client and find out what their feelings are about the service provider.

Summary

Employee-related problems can have far-reaching consequences in a business. Learning to identify a problem is the first step to solving it, and while some problems may be more complex and require more sophisticated solutions, keeping the lines of communication open between employer and employee is an important part of the problem-solving process.

As with most aspects of business, preventive measures are usually the most effective and least expensive options for avoiding employee-related problems long before they occur. But, if crisis problem-solving is the issue, it is essential that employers examine the problem and discuss it with the employee in order to effect a solution that is best for the employee and best for the business.

Training is one of the most important issues facing many industries. By emphasizing training as a significant part of running a business, we can begin to increase the number of competent employees industry-wide. If you want to invest wisely in your company, invest in training. A highly skilled professional is good for your company and great for your industry.

Employees are what make a business a business. Without them,

BOOKS BY JOELLE STEELE

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