

Building a Positive Workforce

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"I work hard, and so do my people. I want to be sure to build a positive workforce. But sometimes it seems that we focus on what's wrong, instead of what needs to be fixed. Or people come to me to fix things. How do I pull my people together, and get them to see that they're part of the solution?"

How many of you have heard an employee say, "Gee, boss, it's your company. Just tell me what you want me to do." Probably most owners get that kind of statement at one time or another. And it's a sign of weakness, for the employee, the owner, and the company.

Whatever you do, avoid the temptation to step in and take over. That is how you train employees to take a backseat, and rely on you. Instead, you want to train employees to step in, take action, and follow through to resolution. You do that by challenging employees. Ask, "What do you think we should do?" Or, you can try, "What would you do if this were your company?"

If you think employees are missing the boat, instead of telling them where they're off base, ask questions to make them think. Try, "Have you thought about . . . ?" Or, "What if this happens next, what would you recommend we do then?" Or, "The last time something like this happened, here were a couple

problems that popped up next . . . How do you think we should prepare for that?" Or, "How would you feel if we went down that path, and things didn't work out as well as you planned? What alternatives do you think we should have ready, just in case?"

Be positive and affirming with employees. Let go of negative attitudes. If you walk around assuming people are going to fail, they probably will. Instead, make sure they are prepared to do the job you're asking. I heard someone say recently, of an employee, "I don't understand her, as a person she confounds me, but I believe in her ability to succeed and that's all I really need to know."

That said, as much as possible, do get to know what motivates, confuses or frustrates the people who work for you. Some people need reassurance in order to bloom and take risks. Other people like challenges. You have to adjust your style to fit each individual.

Demand people step up to the plate and give you their best, because you know they are capable of succeeding. Show how their jobs fit into the company's overall goals. Be clear about specific tasks and expectations.

Set and agree to standards, and then don't settle. Inconsistency in terms of what you demand of

people, how you reprimand people, or in terms of assignments you hand out, only confuses people and puts them off their game. Hold everyone accountable for hitting their goals. Be consistent in how you reward success and how you deal with breakdowns and shortfalls. Treat everyone with respect.

Be honest with the people who work with you. If you have people who are truly struggling, change their job around, to make a better fit. Implement training to improve skills. Tell people you expect them to do better, and that you believe that is possible. Track results so you know how they're doing. If they no longer have a job, or you see people struggling too much, you owe it to them to tell them, instead of letting them hang on and get frustrated

Pay attention to the level of morale in the office. Ask people how they're doing. If stress is high, consider some down time. Spring is coming. Maybe you need a company picnic. Ask employees for feedback. Be willing to listen, and take time to process what you hear before you respond.

Create a positive environment where people can talk openly about highs and lows. Teach people there's a difference between talking about problems and constant complaining. Keep people from getting stuck on the "whines", by demanding that if



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they whine about something, they must also propose realistic solutions, and then take action to fix the problems they're discussing.

Identify employees with leadership potential, who can help their peers move from problems to resolution. Encourage those employees, by telling them you like what you see, and citing specific examples. Give them additional opportunities to grow and spread their positive influence.

This is your job as boss. As you learn to do these things well, you will be able to get more out of your people. Output goes up, as people learn to rely on themselves to close the gap.

Looking for a good book? Try Transcultural Leadership: Empowering the Diverse Workforce by George Simons, Carmen Vazquez and Philip Harris.

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