

Nobody is empowered to make a decision

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"We have a lot of people who stop short of taking the reins and running with improvements. They're all deferring to me and I just want them to take action. What can I do?"

Building an organization that functions without the owner at the center can be a real challenge - and a real joy to own if you can get it to work right.

Entrepreneurs can sometimes be their own worst enemies, as they seek to empower the organization. They've had a lot of practice taking charge - in fact that's usually one of their strongest management traits. They are often unaware of how forcefully their feedback comes across. They are impatient and results driven. They've had a lot of experience with what works and what doesn't, they want things done a certain way and they hate mistakes and waste.

At the same time, most small businesses hire people who have to learn how to do things. Rarely is there enough money to enable the company to hire experts in every area. Combine demanding entrepreneurs with people who need to build skills and make changes, and that's when the problems start.

A typical situation

An individual gets asked to take on something new. Something goes awry. The owner steps in to fix things or jumps on someone to get something done. Or, the owner provides feedback too sharply. The individual(s) who got it wrong start to think, "I'm not going to try that again, it made my boss too upset."

Alternately, the owner figures that intervening isn't working so he backs out too soon and too far. The individuals who need support don't get what they need. They end up struggling with productivity, accuracy and confidence issues.

Owners have to encourage people to make mistakes and learn. Agree on the goal, so you're both focused on the same end point. Resist the temptation to jump in. And don't expect things to be error-free.

Provide limited feedback and oversight until skills and habits are up to speed. Listen and guide rather than demand. Know that training requires consistent, tactful communication.

Be careful to teach rather than criticize. Set aside time to discuss. Ask people to explain what steps they took, describe what they think went wrong and walk through what they might do differently next time.

Check on progress

Here are some questions you can ask to help a person make progress:

- Let's make sure we're on the same page, tell me what you're trying to accomplish.
- Walk me through the steps you took to get there. What happened, what worked, what didn't?
- Knowing what you now know, how would you do things differently?
- When's the next time you're going to try this?
- What oversight or support would you like from me?
- How would you know if you're successful next time?

The person you're talking to will make mistakes in their description of what happened, or what's going to happen next. Nudge them, rather than bossing them. Ask, "What about...?" or "Have you considered...?"

If someone is stuck, back up a little. Suggest taking a little time to think and get back together in an hour (or a day, or a week) to regroup. Have the person write out their goals and the steps they want to take. Review the written document together, making suggestions rather than demands. Encourage the person by recognizing where and when they make progress.

Keep lists of what needs follow up. Agree ahead of time on what actions or results will occur, by when. Then decide how to best check on progress. Observe the individual's repair and recovery activities. Don't step in to correct. Let the individual fix their own mistakes so that they get the lesson. Do stay involved enough to know they're heading in the right direction.

Looking for a good book? Try "Turning Training Into Learning: How to Design and Deliver Programs that Get Results," by Sheila W. Furjanic and Laurie A. Trotman.

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