

Behind the Counter

Staffing, Managing and Leadership

As our small businesses grow we may need to add staff. The expectation is that if I hire staff, I can offload some of what I do and then I can go after more business. Sometimes adding staff can place more of a burden on the business owner especially during times of training and staff turnover or if you have hired someone that turns out to not be a good fit for your company.

When considering to add staff, it is really important to determine what you want the staff member to do and set out procedures that will help you to train the staff member. There is nothing more frustrating than training a staff person and when you think they are fully trained, they continue to come to you for answers to procedural questions that could have been taken care of in a procedural document.

The other consideration is qualifications. You need to look for a person that is qualified for the position and has had training in another business for the position you are looking to fill. If someone else has trained your candidate, then it becomes easier for them to slide into the position in your office.

Finally there is the question of fit. Most staff that work in a small office need to be self starters which means that they need to be able to understand the business quickly and need to be able to see what needs to be done and be able to work independently and fearlessly. It is most disappointing to hire staff who flatly refuse to try anything new out of their comfort zone and let things pile up for you to deal with when 'you have time'. Also the new staff member's personality needs to fit with you and more importantly your customers. If you hire someone that is rude to your customers, then you run the risk of losing them and your business quickly.

So that brings up the question of management style and of leadership. My definition of management is to have the procedures in place and methods to review the work being done along the way and at the end point. If there are questions, the staff member can then be referred back to the procedure document. Writing up procedures for every task can be a very time consuming process. In many small businesses, the procedure depends on the individual customer's wants and that is very difficult to write into a policy. So I would expect a lot of interaction with your staff with respect to your customer's needs and wants. Perhaps a contact management software program might help to outline the idiosyncrasies about the account. One method that works quite well is to have each person in the position create a job description in detail, so that in case anything happens to that person someone from a temporary agency can come in and pick up the job description or procedures document and continue on with the work fairly easily. Again this document must be kept up to date especially if there are software changes or frequent staff turnovers.

Managing is also being able to give performance reviews and being able to confront and correct a staff member that might be out of line. Most people strive to do a good job and don't normally come to work looking for things to mess up during the day. We can all have a bad day, or perhaps something has been misunderstood, but continual mess ups need to be addressed. Many small business owners don't

like confrontation, so they may hire a person and instruct them on how to do certain tasks, but may not like the outcome. So instead of speaking to the person, the small business owner may do the task themselves after hours, the way that they know it needs to be done. My question is then – what are you paying your staff for, if you are redoing the work after hours?

Leadership is another way of managing staff. My definition of leadership is to show someone the starting point and then explain what the end point is supposed to look like but let them figure out the way between the two points. If you use this method of management, you need to be really clear about some sort of deadline for the task, otherwise you could have a staff member spinning their wheels and not really getting anything accomplished. The staff member that is given this freedom needs to have enough education and experience to be able to get from point 'a' to point 'b' easily. It is easy to give a task to a really gung ho staff member, only to discover several weeks later that there was so little understanding of what was required that you need to do it all over yourself from scratch anyway and how do you bill for that?

Sometimes communication with staff needs to occur more than once. In other words, you may need to explain procedures and concepts to staff members several times as people may not understand where you are coming from right away. The magic is to encourage questions as well as encourage independent thinking and initiative.

There are also several other kinds of management and leadership styles that I have not discussed here. Examples are the team concept of leadership or perhaps the gofer style of management.

In many small businesses the staff component of the financial statement might be the most significant expense on the statement so it needs to be managed carefully. We tend to get so drawn up in getting the customers or doing the more complex work, that we neglect the communication with our staff. Our staff is also the best selling feature of our business, so it is important to keep them happy and when our staff are happy, we are happy too.

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