In dealing with small businesses, the first cry of most owners is about the difficulty of accessing capital. The next cry is about finding and keeping good employees. Without a doubt, good employees are the most valuable asset any company can have. In these tough times, it is important to get the most out of your employees.

**Lead by example.** One of the first ways to get top performance from your employees is to lead by example. Be the first person on the job every day and the last to leave. This lets your employees know that you have a strong work ethic and you are not asking more from them than you are willing to give yourself.

**Exhibit a positive attitude.** Anyone who is reading the paper and listening to the news can’t help but hear negative news regarding the economy. You must keep the news in context for your employees. You must show them how your company can grow or maintain business during a period of slower economic growth. You must be open and honest about the challenges but positive about the opportunities to overcome any challenges your business may be facing. Having a good business plan and sharing this with your employees can be a great way to keep everyone on track and moving in the same direction.

**Reward good performance.** If the budget won’t allow for a monetary bonus, then think of a creative approach to rewards. I’ve seen business owners implement a variety of rewards including time off, flexibility of hours, gift certificates, etc. The method of reward can vary but the result should be motivated employees.

**Empower your employees to satisfy your customers.** If front line employees can’t take care of your customers, who can? An employee should have the authority to make things right within a dollar limit and know who to take the problem to if the limit is exceeded.

**Be open to employee feedback.** Business owners should seek ways to encourage their employees to communicate with them. You should seek feedback on ways to improve operations, selling to customers, and generally how to do things better. One way to do this is to maintain easy access to you so that employees can feel free to communicate these ideas. Remember to praise in public and criticize in private.

**Cross train your employees to do a variety of jobs.** This helps employees feel they are more marketable, keeps them from getting bored, and gives them a sense of job security. Cross training employees helps the business to be more flexible if someone leaves or is out due to illness. In addition, when possible, give your employees a job title. This can enhance their self image.

In short, your employees’ productivity, skills, and attitude can make or break your company. Hire the right employees, train them well, listen to what they have to say, and reward their productivity. Never forget that your employees are your company’s greatest asset.

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*By Lynn Vos*

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