

Title:

Managing Employees Is A Little Like Herding Cats

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Summary:

Q: I started my small business about a year ago and it's grown steadily. I like having my own business, but I'm having a tough time managing people. I have 5 employees now and it seems like I spend half my time making sure they are doing what they're supposed to be doing and the other half of my time doing things they didn't get done. Things were much easier when I was a one man shop. Any suggestions?

-- Paul C.

A: Ah, Paul, welcome to the wonderful world of employee man...

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Article Body:

Q: I started my small business about a year ago and it's grown steadily. I like having my own business, but I'm having a tough time managing people. I have 5 employees now and it seems like I spend half my time making sure they are doing what they're supposed to be doing and the other half of my time doing things they didn't get done. Things were much easier when I was a one man shop. Any suggestions?

-- Paul C.

A: Ah, Paul, welcome to the wonderful world of employee management, the bane of many a business owner's existence. I hope you have a full head of hair now, because depending on how quickly you get a grip on this situation, you could end up bald in a very short time. And if you're starting out bald all you can do is put on a cap and read on.

Some business experts will tell you that managing people is an art. Others will tell you that managing people is a skill. I'm going to tell you that managing people is more like herding cats. Just when you think you have them all going in the same direction one will run off and you have to go catch it. And by the time you get back with the stray cat the rest of the herd has all gone off in different directions. It's no wonder most entrepreneur's hate cats. They remind

us how little control we sometimes have on our employees.

The hardest part of employee management is maintaining control over your business while the herd is running wild. To further push the analogy envelope consider this: if your employees are running the business instead of you, it's a little like the inmates taking over the insane asylum. Crazy things might start to happen, like losing customers and being run out of business.

Here's the bottomline, Paul: you either manage your employees or they will manage you, it's simple as that.

The truth is the key to managing employees is to hire only the best people, train them well, make them feel that they have a vested interest in the success of your business, and expect nothing but the best from them.

And when you do find that rare employee who will do all that for you, you should go out of your way to do nice things for them, like giving bonuses, raises, job security, added responsibility, praise, a big turkey at Christmas, etc. Finding good employees is hard. Keeping them happy shouldn't be.

One of the most difficult task faced by every business owner is finding good people to work in their business. And by good people I mean honest, loyal, dedicated, hard working individuals who will give their all for the good of the business and go above and beyond the call of duty to satisfy the customer.

Finding these people is as hard as... well... herding cats. Hard to do, but not impossible. Here are a few tips to help you get a better handle on hiring and managing employees.

Only hire experienced, qualified people with a proven track record of performance. Since your employees are usually the main point of contact with customers, it is vital that you hire only experienced, qualified personnel to represent your business. It's also important that the potential employee have a track record of success in the kind of position he's being hired for. If it's a sales job, you want to hire someone who has proven that he can sell. If it's servicing copiers you want to hire someone who has proven himself a pro at fixing copiers. Forget hiring rookies and offering on the job training when it comes to key personnel. Go with an old pro every time, even if it costs you more to do so. The investment will be returned to you manifold.

Screen every applicants thoroughly. There are lots of applicant screening products on the market now that will help you screen applicants for things like honesty, integrity, ambition, former drug use, past criminal behavior, etc.

These products range from simple paper forms to fancy web-based applications. Find one that suits your needs and use it on every applicant that comes through the door. You will be amazed at how a good screening program will help you weed out problem employees before they are hired.

Perform drug tests and background checks on key personnel. I beg the pardon of those "right to privacy" do-gooders who tell me that a person's personal life and urine contents are none of my business, but if I'm going to be paying someone's salary every week you can be certain that I will exercise my right to check out that person as far as the letter of the law allows. The U.S. government tells me what I can and can't do when it comes to checking out potential employees, not you. Go save a tree and leave me to run my business.

Always check professional references. This is a huge mistake that many employers make. They ask for references, but never check the quality or legitimacy of the reference. Surveys have shown that most job application references are either bogus or just family and friends who are willing to say how great the applicant is. Forget references from family and friends. Ask for the names of their last three employers then call to verify the information on the application. By law, past employers are limited as to what they can divulge about the applicant, but if you simply ask: would you hire this person again given the chance, you will be amazed at what you can learn. The former employer will either answer immediately that they would rehire the person or there will be a long pause on the other end of the phone. Either way, you have found out what you wanted to know.

Never hire out of desperation. Many employers are more concerned with just filling an open slot than filling it with someone qualified to do the work. You see this mostly in the fast food, retail, and manufacturing industries where the turnover rate is off the scale and finding good employees is like herding mammals of the feline species (last one, I promise). Never hire someone just because they have a pulse. It will always come back to haunt you.

Use a probationary period to weed out non-performers. You should inform new hires that you have a 60 day probationary period in which you will regularly assess their attitude and performance. If at the end of the probationary period the employee is not the worker you thought they would be, gracefully have a final review and let them go. Most non-performers will never reach the end of the 60 day period anyway.

When someone does a good job reward them for it. Incentives are a great way to improve employee performance. We are all like little kids. If we think we're going to get a new toy (or a bonus) for doing a good job we are more likely to

excel. You should reward good performance and make a very big deal out of the fact that you do. You can do this with stock options or bonus checks or free vacations or whatever.

It is important that all your employees understand that when the company does good, they will do good. As the company grows, so will their paychecks.

Here's to your success!