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Let Employees Help You Grow

BusinessWeek reader Brad Farris says small business owners must prepare employees to meet critical challenges—and then trust them to do so

By [Brad Farris](#)

A few weeks ago, Scott Halford [wrote a column](#) for BusinessWeek.com about how businesses reap what they tolerate from their employees. I observed this while working at a big corporation years ago, but I notice it even more now that I work directly with small business owners.

In this economy, everyone is trying to do more with less. Many business owners try to accomplish that by doing more themselves, but that's a road to burnout, not growth. I see people who have scaled back to just their "key people," and in that case it's more important to trust their teams. The pressure of doing more with less makes trust that much more important.

When a small business grows, the owner has to entrust some important (even critical) responsibilities to employees so he or she can focus on leading the business. But since the owner feels such a connection to the business, it can be difficult to trust anyone with substantial responsibility because they'll never do as good a job as the owner, right? No. As a matter of fact, that mindset is what prevents many promising businesses from succeeding.

Generally speaking, employees want the business they work for to be a success, too; in fact, they want to help make it happen. When I point this out to business owners, I often hear: "Maybe that's true, but not here. I can't get my staff to perform. These people just aren't up to it." This response makes me want to pull my hair out. If you need better people, get better people. You are the boss. Recruit, train, and deploy whatever workforce you want to have!

Most of the time the problem isn't bad employees but bad management. Managing a team is hard, but the process is straightforward. There are four things your team needs in order to perform:

Accountability. Whether you believe this or not, every employee wants to be held accountable. They want us to have standards and hold them to those standards. If we have different rules for different people or tolerate behavior or performance that's not consistent with our values, everyone will see it. We will encounter dissension and will undermine the trust and confidence our team has in us and our leadership.

Communication. Good people don't join your company to shuffle paper; they want to make a difference. When we talk to candidates or team members, we want to show them how their efforts can make a difference in the success of our company and in the execution of our company's mission. We want them to know there is an opportunity here to do something great. This needs to be communicated in the job posting, in the way we do an interview, and in the way we introduce them on the first day of work. They are here to complete an important mission. Framing the position in this way will not attract the kind of people who only want to shuffle paper or perform adequately. That's good—we aren't looking for more of those! Of course, these tools can be used with your existing team members, too. Go and re-recruit them for the job they are in. Tell them about the great challenges you see and engage them in meeting those

challenges.

Resources. Sure, they need tangibles like a computer, a desk, and a phone, but they also need our time and attention. Studies show that the support of the immediate supervisor is the No. 1 reason people succeed in a new role or job. We cannot possibly communicate all that a candidate needs to know in one orientation session or even a couple of training meetings. Initially we have to set aside time to work with them closely until they settle into the rhythm.

A Scoreboard. Kindergarten had it right: We need gold stars to tell us we are doing well, but this isn't going to be as simple as sitting in our seats with our hands folded. You and your new team member need to agree on the outcomes you are looking for from their work. How do they know they are on the road to meeting the challenge you presented them with? The best kind of scoreboard is one they can see themselves (e.g., they can run the report or it gets sent to them automatically) and is frequently updated (daily or weekly) so they can measure their progress. Of course, your current team needs a scorecard, too.

As business owners, we have the best job in the world. The only question is: Are we going to choose to exercise our authority and lead our teams to great heights? Or are we going to whine and complain about how our people aren't doing what we asked?

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