Motivating Your Staff For Peak Performance

Like hiring, learning to motivate employees takes time and experience, especially for a small business owner. When I started my company, I assumed that motivating my staff would be no different than it was when I worked as a corporate executive. How wrong I was.

As a corporate executive, I was part of an established hierarchy. There were rules about who reported to whom, about when people received raises and promotions, about hiring and firing, about salaries and benefits. My staff and I were part of a bigger organization, so there were plenty of other people to turn to for help. What's more, someone else was paying my staff. I didn't have to find the money every week to cover their salaries.

When I hired my first employee at Jane Wesman Public Relations, everything was different. It was just the two of us in tight quarters. I had been in business for about six months and it was hard to hide my anxieties about launching a new company, about finding new clients, about paying the bills. I tended to magnify small problems and I lost my temper unnecessarily. But I also shared each triumph and success.

It's to the credit of my first employee, Lori Ames Stuart, that after working for me for three years and then leaving to take a high-level position elsewhere for the next six, she returned in 1991 to take over as vice-president of my firm. When I asked her recently what she thinks I do to motivate employees, she replied, "You don't do anything to motivate us. We love working here." Her spontaneous response showed me that I
have indeed come a long way if motivating my staff seems so natural that no one knows
I'm doing it. The truth is, I've worked hard at learning how to treat employees so that
they are happy and productive.

Motivation begins with the job interview. If you hire the wrong person, you will never be
able to motivate him or her, no matter how hard you try. Communicating, training, and
creating a good work environment are other key motivators.

Ten Ways To Inspire Your Staff

1. Communicate. Make sure your employees know what you expect of them. Describe
the job and your expectations before hiring, and reiterate your expectations regularly.
With a new employee, this may be a daily necessity. Later, it can be done weekly. Be
specific. For example, don't say, "I want you to double your sales this month." Explain
how you expect someone to do so, perhaps by changing the sales pitch, developing a
new client list, or making more sales call per day.

2. Train. Take the time to train your employees in your ways of doing business. It may
be time consuming in the beginning, but it will pay off. And remember that no matter
how much time you think it will take to train someone, it will probably take longer, even
with experienced employees. Last year, I hired a senior publicist. I assumed it would
take her about four weeks to familiarize herself with our projects, learn our methods,
and take on a full workload. Eight weeks later, she was still having trouble meeting
deadlines. I was becoming frustrated and felt I was spending too much time training
her. She claimed I was being impatient.

Neither one of us was willing to give up, though. We set a deadline of four more weeks,
by which time she believed she would be able to work independently. During the four-
week trial period, I continued to work closely with her, giving her all the advice and feedback she requested. She, in return, put in extra hours and made a special effort to get all of her projects under control. In the end, every thing worked out well. It was certainly worth the extra time it took to train this employee. She is now an invaluable addition to my staff.

3. Recognize that people want to do a good job. They do not make mistakes because they think it's fun, or because they want to spite you, or make you lose money. I've seen business owners scream in rage over employees' mistakes as if they were made on purpose.

4. Give employees honest and direct feedback. Don't wait until you're ready to explode to tell someone that the job is not being done right. The reverse is also true. I encourage my staff to tell me early on if they see a problem with a project or assignment. In this way, we look for a solution, before it's too late.

5. Let employees know that you appreciate their contributions to your company. Make them feel that what they do is important to you and makes a difference to the company. This includes everyone, right down to the receptionist, who needs to know that the way he or she deals with people on the telephone or visitors to the office is vital in establishing a courteous and professional image for the company.

6. Eliminate fear. Be honest and accessible. Don't play favorites. And don't tolerate abusive behavior from anyone -- suppliers, clients, or employees. If in doubt about how to treat an employee, ask yourself, Is this the way I would like to be treated?
7. Create a workplace that's efficient and physically comfortable. Consider your employees' health, time, and happiness when buying furnishings and equipment. Don't skimp if it will make someone's job easier. I held out for over a year before replacing our old copier machine, but it was money well spent. Our mail room assistant is much happier now that she has a faster machine that doesn't break down. The biggest benefit is that she gets more work done each day.

8. Create an attractive workplace that gives employees a sense of pride. When I worked at a big company, I always wondered why the walls were painted gray. It costs no more to paint the walls a bright color. I resolved that when I started my own business I would make the office as bright and inviting as possible. Many of my employees have commented on the beauty of the office and how pleasant it is to come to work in the morning. Best of all, they tend to keep a beautiful office neat and organized, which is great for productivity and efficiency.

9. Encourage employees to ask questions and make suggestions. Listen to their ideas. Implement the ones that will improve productivity and sales or add to a general sense of well-being in the work environment. Check out Martin Edelston's book, I Power (Barricade Books, 1992) for more ideas on encouraging employees to make useful suggestions.

10. Spread the excitement. Let employees know when things are going well, and don't keep them in the dark when there are problems. There's no reason to notify them about every setback, but you might tell them, for example, that cash flow is tight and you need their help. When talking about problems, don't scare them into thinking that the end is near.
Identifying Stumbling Blocks That Can Impede Your Plans

We all bring an ample supply of emotional baggage into the business situation. Despite our best intentions, there are times when we feel frustrated, impatient, angry or just plain insecure. If this happens occasionally, there is nothing to worry about. But if you are having difficulties with your employees on a regular basis, there could be some emotional stumbling blocks standing in your way. For women entrepreneurs, these stumbling blocks often fall into three categories with specific recurring issues.

Treating Employees Like Family Or Friends Is A No-Win Situation

Some women entrepreneurs tend to view their employees as family. This is fine to a certain extent, but employees are not your family, or even your friends. Don’t drag personal emotions or relationships into the business situation. Beware of the following types of behavior:

- Becoming extremely angry over small mistakes
- Being unable to express your anger and shutting yourself off when an employee does something wrong
- Feeling personally insulted if an employee asks for a raise or decides to quit
- Confiding in employees too much
- Reacting as if your employees are purposely making mistakes to spite you

Seeking To Be Liked Can Be A Trap

Most women have been socialized to be liked, not necessarily to succeed. Or to put it another way, women have been socialized to succeed by being liked. If unconsciously it's more important to be liked than to succeed, how can you deal with an employee who isn't doing a good job? If you criticize the employee, he or she may not like you very much. If you fire the employee, you definitely won't be liked.
If you have trouble being a good motivator or leader, perhaps your behavior is being driven by the need to be liked.

Some of the symptoms of this problem include:

- Feeling guilty or uncomfortable when you admonish an employee
- Allowing an employee to easily convince you that you are the one who is wrong
- Having difficulty saying no to employees when they make unreasonable requests
- Being overly concerned about whether an employee likes the job or likes working for you
- Doing or saying things to please the employee

There's nothing wrong with having employees who like you. The problem occurs when your behavior towards them is overpowered by this emotion.

Lack Of Confidence Can Trip You Up

A third stumbling block is the lack of self-confidence in running a business. Women have not been taught to view themselves as clear-headed thinkers who can make tough decisions. Sometimes this translates into being a wimp, and sometimes it translates into being overly tough with employees. Neither is the best way to motivate staff.

Some signs of low self-confidence include:

- Having difficulty evaluating an employee's performance
- Turning over too much responsibility to employees instead of handling it yourself
- Being afraid to give up responsibility
- Expecting an employee to solve problems that are beyond his or her grasp
- Being overly tough on or unforgiving of mistakes
You're not alone if you are suffering from low self-esteem. It's a persistent problem for women in our culture. Don't enhance the problem by berating yourself. Instead, try some of the following tips.

**Overcoming The Stumbling Blocks**

The first step in overcoming these stumbling blocks is to recognize that you may be responding inappropriately because of your own emotional baggage. But be careful not to blame yourself or to focus solely on the negative. Negative thinking is another emotional trap.

Next, consider the fact that the relationship between a small business owner and an employee is not an equal one. You have control over whether or not your employees keep their jobs. This is different from the structure in large corporations, where employees generally report to bosses who cannot fire them without obtaining approval from their own bosses or others within the firm. As a small business owner, you have the final say. This means that underneath it all your employees may be a little scared of you. Therefore you don't have to be either a tyrant or a wimp because you already hold all the cards. You have all the power you need to be a terrific motivator and a wonderful employer. You just need to use your power wisely.

To help you gain perspective on your behavior, try to identify the situations that stand in your way in working with employees. Make a list of situations when your behavior seems inappropriate -- whether it's an over-reaction or an under-reaction -- and when you do not achieve the result you hoped for.
Note the time of day when the incidents occurred and how you felt as they started. (Were you rushed, worried, concerned about money? Did you feel hungry, tired, over-stimulated by caffeine?) What did you and your employee say to each other? Is there a certain type of employee who sets you off (e.g., someone who's extremely outgoing, or perhaps the opposite, someone who's extremely self-effacing)?

You will start to see a pattern. You might discover, for example, that you often lose your temper late in the day, when you're feeling tired or hurried, and when you think an inexperienced employee has not followed directions. Once you identify the situation, you can create a strategy to deal with it.

So the next time it's 4:45 p.m. and someone has made a mistake, you will know that this could be the start of one of your ugly confrontations. Only this time you will be prepared. Your strategy might be to ask the employee to come back and speak with you in the morning, when you will be more relaxed.

Or try this. Take a deep breath. Stay calm and communicate. Ask the employee what he or she thought you wanted done. Find out if your instructions were clear enough. You may discover that the person has been so intimidated by your reactions that he or she was afraid to ask questions and therefore did not know what to do. Or you may discover that the person is not experienced enough to handle certain chores and needs more training. Or, and this is a worst case scenario, you may discover after evaluating the employee over a period of time that he or she is not right for the job. Whatever you discover, at least you will be able to make a clear-headed decision about what to do -- a decision that will not be tainted by a load of irrelevant emotional baggage.
Soliciting Professional Help When The Going Gets Tough

If identifying the areas that cause problems between you and your employees is not enough to smooth things out, consider seeking professional help. Perhaps this sounds extreme, but many women business owners say that psychotherapy has been helpful in running their businesses. They have been able to resolve problems with self-esteem, problems with clients, problems with their attitude towards money or seeking new business.

Many professionals in the mental health care field have experience helping entrepreneurial women. Finding the right one is similar to hiring other professionals such as accountants and lawyers. Ask for recommendations from people whose judgment you trust, and try to find a therapist who has experience counseling women like you. It's okay to meet with several therapists before making a decision.

According to New York psychologist Susan Tross, "A good therapist should be able to withstand your protests and provoke you to go beyond the limits of your current routine or level of functioning." She suggests asking yourself the following questions when choosing a therapist:

- Can I trust this person with my most difficult thoughts?
- Will I be able to talk with this therapist about the things I want to hide from everyone else?
- Does this therapist have the intellectual and personal strength to question me even when I don't want to answer, and to help me get to know myself better?
In the end, go with your gut reaction and choose the therapist with whom you feel most comfortable. A good therapist can be an invaluable tool to your success, both professionally and personally.

**Motivating Your Staff Is One Of The Joys Of Being An Entrepreneur**

There is nothing more rewarding, both financially and emotionally, than helping other people, as well as yourself, work to their fullest potential. The keys to being a good motivator are clear communication, training, and appreciation. Although stumbling blocks may stand in your way, you can overcome them once you recognize their existence and make a serious effort to work them out. As the head of your own company, you have the power to be a great leader.