

ARE YOU A

GOOD BOSS?

YOU MIGHT NOT BE DOING AS WELL AS YOU THINK; ANALYZE YOUR PERFORMANCE—AND WAYS YOU CAN IMPROVE—BY CONSIDERING THESE NINE KEY QUESTIONS

BY WILLIAM J. LYNOTT

YOU'VE BUILT A reasonably profitable business over the years, but you often feel that you should be doing better. Unfortunately, pinpointing the reasons for less-than-optimum results can be a tricky business.

It's far too easy to blame external causes such as competition, uncontrollable operating expenses or the economy. While situations like that can exist, another cause can be much more difficult to face: management shortcomings.

Are you really doing the great management job you think you're doing? Here are nine questions that will help you to analyze your own performance while pointing the way to better profits.

1 Do you avoid showing signs of favoritism? Favoritism, or even the appearance of it, can be a deadly enemy of positive employee attitudes. An employee who feels that he or she is the victim of favoritism is likely to develop an unseen grudge—one that can silently, but effectively, damage your business.

Any indication that you regard one employee with more respect or appreciation than any other is a certain path to negative employee morale. While it's not always possible for you to avoid regarding some staff members more highly than others, allowing that feeling to become obvious to others is a serious management failure, one that almost certainly will exact a costly penalty.

2 Do you understand the importance of self-esteem?

Everyone has a powerful need to feel respected, accepted and valued by others. This need is felt in every aspect of a person's life, and nowhere is it felt more strongly than in a business environment. From brain surgeons to salesclerks to laborers, the craving for self-respect and recognition is so strong that it can dominate and control employee behavior and performance regardless of financial considerations.

The work of an employee left with no reason to think that his boss respects and values his contribution is almost certain to fall well below his potential. In extreme cases, negligent or even harmful behavior will be the eventual result.

Providing the kind of recognition that satisfies this important need is a critical part of being a great boss.

3 Are you a good listener?

Most experts agree that good listeners are rare. Human nature being what it is, we typically think about what we want to say next rather than listen to what the other person is saying. If that sounds familiar, you have a valuable opportunity to bolster your business success.

Good listeners have a huge advantage in connecting with people—and connecting with customers, prospects and employees is a critically important part of running a specialized retail business. According to playwright Wilson Mizner, "A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something."

Michele Tillis Lederman, author and adjunct professor at New York University's

Stern School of Business, agrees. "Regardless of where you are in your business career," she says, "listening is a skill that you must work on."

Listening is not a passive activity. It takes energy and concentration to focus on what people are saying and what they mean by it."

4 Do you avoid "passing the buck"?

A serious disincentive for employee motivation generated by some owners and managers is failing to accept the blame when something goes wrong. Harry Truman set the tone for his administration when he placed a sign on his desk saying, "The buck stops here."

A reputation for always putting the blame on others is a management deficiency that will eventually exact a heavy toll in the form of employee unrest. Being in charge means being willing to take responsibility for whatever happens on your watch.

If a leader wants to build an atmosphere that promotes positive motivation, he or she needs to discuss problems with employees in a private setting.

If he wants people to stay late to get ready for an expected heavy workload or to finish an important project, he needs to stay late himself. If she wants courteous employees, she must offer that same courtesy to others around her.

In short, the person leading the operation must display the behavior he or she wants others to emulate.

While employee motivation may seem too theoretical a subject for some busy store owners, others will recognize that attention to the kind of employee concerns discussed here can make the difference between mediocrity and optimum performance.

5 Do you encourage your employees to contribute their ideas?

People who do the same job over and over every day often gain a perspective that even the boss cannot match. This can lead to ideas for improvement attainable in no other way.

Not every employee idea will be workable, but those that are used have a double benefit: They improve productivity, and they encourage the contributor and other employees to make a strong effort to make them work.

6 Do you really "know" your employees?

Each of your employees is someone with a unique set of needs, talents and individual circumstances. Fortunately, providing the kind of recognition that considers employee individuality is an easy task. One of the simplest and most effective ways to develop and demonstrate sincere interest is to take a little time to learn something about each employee. Ask about such simple things as significant others and children, hobbies and special interests, and then follow through from time to time with a little conversation that shows you remember them and are genuinely interested.

Showing you have an interest in your employees as fellow human beings is one of the best ways to build employee loyalty—and productivity.

IN ACTUAL PRACTICE, EFFECTIVE DELEGATION IS A HALLMARK OF SKILLFUL MANAGEMENT.

7 Are you a good delegator?

The idea of entrusting responsibility to others makes some bosses feel uncomfortable, as if they are giving up power that rightfully belongs to them. Actually, good delegation is a way of harnessing the talent of other people to the boss's advantage.

Some managers fool themselves into thinking that if they want it done right, they always have to do it themselves. That philosophy is a way of closing the door on employees who want to contribute to the success of the business. In actual practice, effective delegation is a hallmark of skillful management.

8 Are you a good communicator?

Have you ever been frustrated by an employee's failure to follow instructions correctly or to do a task the way you expected it to be done? If so, it's quite possible the fault was your own, that you failed to make your instructions unmistakably clear.

The ability to communicate with preci-

sion doesn't come naturally to most of us, regardless of the extent of our education. That's unfortunate, since the ability to express our thoughts clearly and effectively is an essential ingredient in successful business management.

Since words are the tools with which we build ideas, most experts agree that building a better vocabulary is a key to better communication. That does not mean you should take the job of building a powerful vocabulary to mean the relentless addition of exotic words just for the sake of sheer numbers—quite to the contrary. The most appropriate word will seldom be the longest or most obscure one. The possessor of an unnecessarily large vocabulary runs the constant risk of being misunderstood.

The trick is to master enough words to allow clear expression of your thoughts without resorting to the use of words that are beyond the understanding of all but English professors or literary scholars.

In short, the responsibility for successful communication lies primarily with the sender, not the receiver.

9 Do you set a good example?

If you want to get the best out of your employees, if you want them to be loyal and productive, it's important for you to set a good example.

Employees don't receive inspiration from manuals or vocal instructions. The kinds of behavior you want to see from them are best shown, not told.

As an example, great bosses raise the bar by handling tough situations, such as customer complaints, with courtesy and respect toward the customer, even when he or she seems to be "wrong."

Good bosses never practice the philosophy "Do as I say, not as I do."

The most effective managers are those who can answer "yes" to all or most of the questions in this brief test. How did you make out?

Freelance writer William J. Lynott specializes in business management as well as personal and business finance. His work has appeared in Reader's Digest, AARP Bulletin and other consumer and trade publications. Web: www.blynott.com.