

By Hal Theiste

During difficult economic times such as these, it takes all the business acumen, ingenuity and creativity a business owner has just to keep the enterprise afloat. Controlling inventory levels, reducing overhead expenses, being responsive to changes in the market and finding ways to increase sales with minimal impact on margins are all very important. But one area that often gets overlooked is the need to maintain solid communications with employees. It is difficult in slow business periods to “tell it like it is” and keep an open flow of communications by having regular employee meetings. Neglecting employee meetings can cut off a valuable source of ideas which could be of help in dealing with the realities of the business. Worse, it can create an environment in which negative rumors abound, leading to employee unease and fear, followed by lower productivity and reduced employee loyalty. It is very important to have and maintain a regular schedule of employee communications. Employee meetings, with an open flow of information and candid responses to questions, are vital in every business setting.

Making the Most of Employee Meetings

Sometimes there can be a perception that a staff meeting consumes valuable employee time that could be better devoted to managing the business, improving the product or service and focusing on customers. Not only that, but there is the cost of the employee time during the meeting.

In reality, employee meetings rank among the top investment of the owner’s time and effort. Two-way communication between management and employees is the hallmark of a well-run company. Your objective must be that all employees are assured that you are interested in them and that you value their ideas and contributions to the operation of the business.

Even if you speak with each of your employees on a regular basis, ongoing communication with employees through group meetings is usually the best way to effectively share information, discuss common issues and capitalize on the synergy of group interaction.

At employee meetings you provide the big picture. Employees may be intimately familiar with their specific tasks or roles but may not understand the larger goals for the company. An employee meeting provides a forum for sharing this information. Give employees an opportunity to ask questions or make suggestions as well as report on their functional areas. By discussing problems and including employees in the search for solutions as participants, not just an audience, they take ownership of the results and you can gain their greater commitment to the goals of the enterprise.

Encourage your employees to come up with new ways to operate or improve current systems. Recognize and reward success publicly. Even though employees get paid for their labor, it’s up to you to make sure they feel that their efforts are meaningful and

appreciated. Take time to say “thank you” to each one; and the more you can do this in a setting of their fellow workers, the greater their increase in self-esteem.

Occasionally you may wish to discuss or share news about challenges the business is facing. This open and honest discussion can help mobilize employees to take action. Be careful not to criticize anyone directly. You always try to end an employee meeting on a positive note, even one about critical business issues. You set the tone and course of the meeting from start to finish.

Meetings should always be on company time, and an employee who comes in on a day off just to attend an employee meeting should be paid for that time. Establish a firm schedule for employee meetings. Decide how often you want to conduct company meetings and prepare an advance schedule and agenda for those meetings.

If you would like to discuss employee meetings, communication or motivation, contact the Sandhills Chapter of SCORE “Counselors to America’s Small Business”. You can reach the Chapter via the web at www.sandhillsscore.org or at 910-692-3926. SCORE is a nationwide nonprofit association of expert business counselors who provide free and confidential business counseling to small business owners. The Sandhills Chapter is very active in counseling, mentoring and presenting free business seminars. If you are interested in helping with these activities your call also would be welcome.

Remember – send your business questions to me at www.contact@sandhillsscore.org and don’t forget to provide a way to contact you. I may not be able to answer all of them in this column but every one will receive a personal answer from one of our Sandhills SCORE counselors!