

BY MELANIE HODGDON

Empowering Employees to Earn Without You

One of my clients was recently pulled off a job to deal with a serious family issue. It's a small company, and though he's the owner, he still puts on his toolbelt. In his absence, his one helper dutifully showed up for work—but was unable to accomplish anything. Because he showed up, he was paid, and because he didn't perform any billable work, the company made nothing those days. This situation can occur whether it's a small, two-person operation or a multimillion-dollar company with a dozen production workers. What's tragic is that it's avoidable.

This problem often occurs because a contractor exhibits one or more of the following characteristics:

Sole decision maker. Nothing happens without his direct involvement and authorization.

Most qualified carpenter. Anything requiring advanced skills must await his personal input.

Lacks detailed plans. The owner may think through all the decisions and find solutions, but he keeps them all in his head. Since employees aren't mind-readers, this requires the owner to communicate clearly.

Poor trainer. The crew is stuck with observing and trying to pick up skills as they go, or guessing what tomorrow's objectives will be. Sometimes they get it right, but they live in a gray world of uncertainty that drains confidence and motivation.

Control freak. The crew is standing around doing nothing while the business owner lays things out, figures out problems (often because of incomplete plans), and performs the "difficult stuff" rather than invest in training his crew so they can perform billable tasks at the same time.

No matter how friendly the owner may be with the crew, they still have to wait around for decisions, for instruction, for leadership. This creates resentment among crew members looking for challenges and a chance to advance, and complacency among those who are content to just hang around and get paid for it.

LETTING GO

The way to avoid all of this starts with recognizing these characteristics in yourself. Ask yourself: What if you are disabled or otherwise prevented from working? How would this impact your family and your employees? Your reputation? Next, look at what's preventing you from letting go. Are you so busy putting out fires that you don't feel you have the "leisure" to stop and train somebody to do what you're doing? While you're pondering the an-

swers, think about this: What is the likelihood that you can expand your business if everything revolves around your personal involvement? If you don't want to be crawling around on rooftops in your 60s, exactly when do you plan on transitioning?

If you are honest with yourself and acknowledge that you don't have the patience or communication skills necessary to impart your skills to others, look to other resources. Can a local technical college

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provide courses for workers? What about professional organizations that offer training programs for everything from green building to lead carpenter certification? (A bonus: Having certified workers may differentiate you from potential competitors.)

No matter what, you will need to let your crew work *on their own*. You, of course, need to supervise and check on them. But then get out of their way! They will make mistakes. Be there to support them. Mistakes happen. The important question will be what does the employee need to keep from making the mistake a second time?

Also keep in mind that although a worker may not accomplish a task in the exact way that you would have, it's still a viable solution. Be open to new approaches based on new technology and research that may have passed you by. This especially applies if your skills are 20 to 30 years old. None of this will be easy if you are truly a control nut. But if you want to grow a sustainable business and a stable, contented, qualified, and engaged workforce, you don't have much choice.

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