

# Are You a GOOD BOSS?

To succeed, integrators must get the most out of their employees. Here are some essential questions supervisors should ask themselves.

by **Phillip M. Perry**

**Are you a great manager? Easy to ask; tough to answer.** Technical skills are only part of the picture. "Champion" managers also possess an array of personal attributes that help transform employees into top performers.

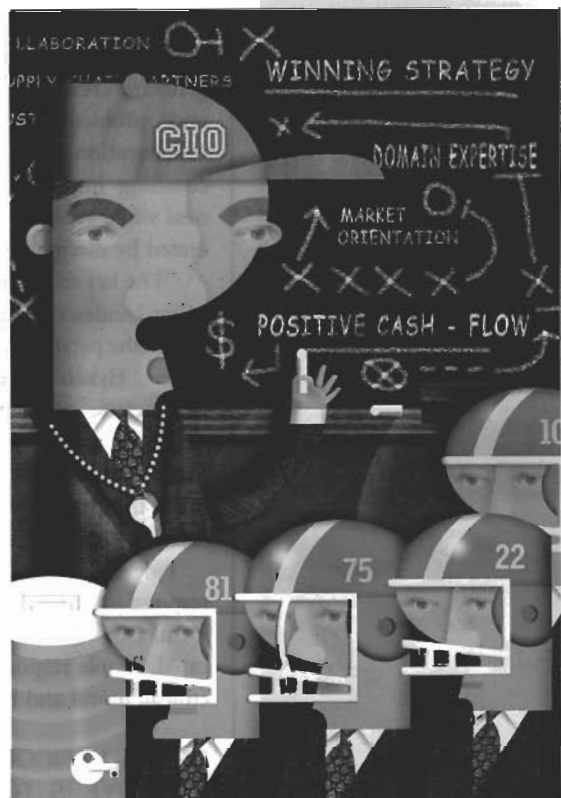
"Great managers, first and foremost, have people skills," notes Shep Hyken, a St. Louis-based consultant. "Managing on the highest level means understanding and motivating employees."

So how good are you at managing those who work for you? Custom electronics business owners should ask themselves a series of questions, then get to work on those areas that need improvement.

## DO YOU CHALLENGE EMPLOYEES TO SET NEW PERFORMANCE GOALS?

No matter how you judge performance—sales, productivity, or efficiency—you must inspire employees to do better.

"The great manager encourages employees to set high goals," says Fred Martels, president of People Solution Strategies, Chesterfield, Mo. He adds that



employers should ask the employees what they need from them. "Ask 'How do you see yourself achieving your goals and how can I help?'"

Finally, follow up with encouragement. "Employees want to be successful but they don't want to be left alone," cautions Martels. "They want to know you are standing behind them."

Daniel Pidgeon, chief financial officer of Dallas-based custom electronics dealer Starpower, agrees that

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communication is key. "Most people need regular feedback on their performance and not just annual or semi-annual reviews. We set our goals quarterly and review monthly. We have tangible methods of evaluating everybody in the company—not just sales."

### DO YOU COACH EMPLOYEES TO HELP THEM OVERCOME PERFORMANCE ISSUES?

Motivated workers are great. But even the most enthusiastic encounter performance problems. That's when the great manager starts coaching.

Coaching encourages employees to generate creative solutions to performance problems. Because it emphasizes collaboration rather than confrontation, coaching improves workplace effectiveness while avoiding the costly stress generated by disciplinary sessions.

"The key to great coaching is to avoid being condescending, because that often makes the person feel guilty or defensive," notes Hyken. Identify performance parameters, communicate them to the employee and then give the person the tools to achieve them. "Your goal is to make the person grow," explains Hyken. "Help the employee push and stretch."

Pidgeon adds that "People do not respond to threats or intimidation to perform. Dogs are trained; people are educated. People respond to a culture that is ethical, moral and hard-working."

### DO YOU ENCOURAGE YOUR EMPLOYEES TO CONTRIBUTE NEW IDEAS?

Employees who contribute ideas feel invested in the success of your business. And employees who feel part of the race will run the extra mile. "The manager must encourage employees to speak up and then listen to what they have to say," says Martels.

Include employees in decision making by encouraging them to suggest ways to do things better, suggests Martels. "Rather than be the designated problem solver,



Daniel Pidgeon, CFO of custom electronics dealer Starpower, believes employees need regular feedback to help them evaluate their work. "We set our goals quarterly and review monthly," he says.

encourage a team effort. Ask stimulating questions such as: "Here is our problem. How do we solve it?"

Oldsmar, Fla.-based S&S Electric Co. Inc., has a suggestion box and also an online suggestion box of sorts. "We have implemented Web site blogs for employees to post ideas, suggestions and allow other employees and managers to expand on those ideas," explains vice president Shawn Smith.

Starpower breaks its employees into separate groups and meets weekly in an effort to generate ideas. "We try to integrate different departments so it is not a 'pile on' about what others are doing wrong, but rather focus on real ideas for improvement," says Pidgeon, adding that smaller groups allow for more free-flowing thoughts.

While he agrees that encouraging ideas among employees is great, Pidgeon warns that employees need to truly understand the company culture and market in order for ideas to be applicable. "We must temper the zest of offering new ideas against the particular employees' understanding of the culture. Until one understands the culture of the business, the ideas can be counterproductive and actually weaken respect for the existing business."

## DO YOU TAKE A PERSONAL INTEREST IN THE PEOPLE WORKING FOR YOU?

Employees aren't just cogs in your profit machine; they're living human beings. And like you, they respond favorably when you recognize that they have a life outside of work. "Little things mean a lot to employees," affirms Leil Lowndes, a New York City-based author of books on communications skills. "Learn their kids' names."

Get to know your employees' outside interests, she adds. "Asking about their hobbies and vacations will help you make better work assignments." Taking a personal interest in people's lives encourages them to stay with your business and commit to its goals.

S&S encourages its employees to put family first, says Smith. "There is nothing that upsets my father [Vern, owner and president] more than to learn that an employee missed one of their kids' recitals or sporting events."

Family is also important to Pidgeon and his partner and brother David and Starpower. Pidgeon says they try to choose employees that share their values, which also include hard work and desire for success—and it's important to nurture those shared values. However, it's important not to get too close. "Many times management makes the mistake of misinterpreting the bonding that takes place," he says. "As a result they develop deep-seeded friendships and become too close and reliant on one person. The result is devastation by the loss of the individual they thought would always be there."

## DO YOU DELEGATE WELL?

"Any organization of any scope or size must delegate," says Pidgeon.

Hyken agrees. "Too many times I've seen people without that ability attempt to micromanage every process. Then they get stressed out because they are trying to do everything themselves," he says.

That's bad, because employees who feel disengaged from events feel helpless and demoralized. And bad attitudes

impact the bottom line.

Acknowledging that delegating is difficult, even for him, Smith recalls the oft-cried motto: "If you want something done right, do it yourself."

"The only reason people say that is that they don't know how to teach somebody else how to do it," he says. "When delegating, you need to play close attention to the individuals' skill levels, their strengths and weaknesses. You need to be an active coach, until you are confident that the individual is confident and capable of performing the tasks at hand."

The courage to delegate doesn't come easily. Hyken suggests using this formula: First visualize the result you want the employee to achieve, then list the steps required to achieve that result, and the skills requisite to each step. Next, rate the employee on a "1 to 5" basis for each of these skills. Finally, after training the employee to a "5" level for each skill, delegate the work with confidence.

## DO YOU COMMUNICATE YOUR PRIORITIES AND DIRECTIONS CLEARLY ENOUGH?

You know what you want from your employees. But do they?

When they don't "it causes chaos, frustration, resentment, fear or failure," warns Smith.

Employees can't perform well when they don't know what constitutes success. "Usually employees don't really know what's critically important to their managers," says Lowndes.

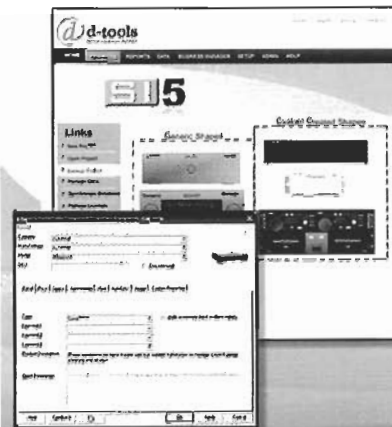
Great managers communicate what's important in clear language. Is it accuracy of work? Arriving on time? Being gracious with customers?

"We do things, such as daily e-mails ranking performance, using electronic tickers ranking daily performance on an LED sign, photographing completed projects and displaying the work in front of peers, etc.," says Pidgeon. "We believe in being transparent and open about our expectations."

When an employee has not met those expectations, it's important to use words

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that inspire as well as challenge, suggests Lowndes. Begin with a positive statement such as this: "Bill, you usually handle customers so well. However, why did you [state the activity observed]?"

Project managers play a roles in maintaining communication with S&S employees. "It's their responsibility to walk the jobs with our employees, answer questions and let them know what is expected of them and what the customer expects of us as a company," says Smith.

### DO YOU RESOLVE CONFLICTS IN A PRODUCTIVE WAY?

The great manager turns "bad" conflict into "good" results. "Conflict can be bad when people just scream at each other," says Hyken. "But it can be good when it leads to new solutions for old problems."

When two employees are in conflict, Hyken suggests, counsel each separately. You might start with a statement such as this: "I see this happening in the work place. . ." and "Tell me what you are seeing."

The employer's approach should depend on what type of conflict it is, according to Pidgeon. "If it's related to a legitimate difference of opinion [on a work-related topic], an intimate conversation with the two individuals and their managers can resolve most problems. If it doesn't work, the manager should be able to determine the individual most responsible and most unwilling to resolve the issue. Hard decisions must be made to preserve professionalism and respect [for the office]."

If it's a personality conflict resulting from something outside of the work environment, it's a different story. "Make it clear that the conflict will not be present in the workplace," says Pidgeon adding that managers are too busy to deal with outside issues.

Regardless of what type of problem it is, "conflicts must be resolved in a private setting," says Pidgeon. "Open tirades are not permissible on any level at any time."

Hyken adds that very often conflict is emotional. "If you feel the individual is

too upset to talk rationally, suggest that you talk at a later time," says Hyken. This will give the person some time to achieve perspective.

Keep the conversation on an objective basis. Emphasize the consequence of not resolving the conflict in terms of decreased productivity or even job termination.

### DO YOU LISTEN WELL?

"Great managers are clear communicators," says Mel Kleiman, a Houston-based management consultant. "And communications is a two-way street: We're talking not only about speaking and writing but also listening."

### "Great managers are clear communicators,"

—Mel Kleiman, management consultant

Effective listening is more than just swinging by somebody's workspace and having impromptu conversations, according to Pidgeon. "We must take time out of our schedules to be present and available during certain times. If this means visiting staff meetings on a regular basis, always responding to e-mails or scheduling time to meet directly, the employee should never be afraid of the meeting."

One way to become a better listener is to volunteer for your company mentor program, if there is one established. Be mentored by a senior manager and offer to mentor a junior one. Being a mentor teaches you to listen better.

And it really is all about listening, says S&S director of human resources Sharon Marsh. "When you are truly not listening and your thoughts are somewhere else, they know this," she says. "It sends a message that you really don't care about them." CE Pro

*Phillip Perry is a freelance writer based in New York City.*