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Fast Lane

Culture of creativity

Drive innovation by giving employees freedom

Smart Business St. Louis | January 2008



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By **Matt McClellan**

Kimberly Boyer's employees own their own destiny. The knowledge that their input can actually change the direction of Adamson Advertising has helped create a culture of ownership at the 60-employee firm, which had 2006 billings of \$60 million.

Boyer, president of Adamson, says she gives her employees the leeway to maneuver independently, and she attributes the firm's success to that freedom.



Smart Business spoke with Boyer about how giving employees freedom allows them to be creative and to excel.

Q. How involved in the day-today operations should a leader be?

Most people who are promoted to a position like mine come from the trenches. When you become a leader, you have to slowly but surely let go of a few things.

Occasionally, when you're doing changes, it varies. If you had a speedometer and one side of the speedometer is high involvement and the other side of the speedometer is low involvement, it will vary by the individual you're working with. The goal would be to get everyone close to the middle.

As a leader, there's no reason for me to be involved in every single detail. If that were the case, we would not grow. I can't do everything, and I don't have all the good ideas.

Occasionally, a leader has to be deeply involved just to show commitment. But you have to know when to get out of the way to let your people have the freedom.

More Fast Lane

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It varies by team, the individual, and the goal would be to let people have enough freedom to move forward and not constrain them.

Building trust

How Bob Shallenberger set the tone for his employees at Highland Homes

Q. How do you empower employees?

We empower them by asking them to set objectives for their teams. We've gone through an entire reorganization this year. We went through some small group meetings, and I laid out the objectives on where I wanted the company to go.

I asked the team leaders to discuss and decide the process how we would reorganize our company in order to meet the coming challenges. By doing it as a group, they owned it. By owning their own destiny, that empowers them.

If you've read the book 'Good to Great,' I totally agree with (Jim Collins) that you can't motivate people; they have to be motivated from within. With that type of thinking, we create a culture where people can aspire to creativity.

Our mission is a freedom to be creative and excel. I don't have to do a lot of it; they inspire each other.

If we can give people the freedom to work together and come up with the best ideas, that's how we create a quality product. By evolving the culture into that environment, it will help us in the future.

Q. How do you create that culture?

We've doubled our training budget this year. When you expose your staff members to new ideas and give them new opportunities to learn, that inspires people.

Great ideas can come from everywhere. So, we're now training everyone from accounting to receptionists. Sometimes when we have idea sessions, we involve people who aren't in the roles we're having ideas about because you never know where a good idea might come from.

The more they know about our business, the better. Training is a key for that.

Q. How do you achieve growth?

You pick and go after new business. And you have to pick the right things to go after — things that you as a team have strength in, and that you can absorb within the company.

Sometimes you can get new business and not have to hire anyone. That's easy.

When you have to add staff, that's more challenging, but if you have a good sense of the type of people who fit well in your company, it's easier to manage.

The individual is the key to achieving and managing business growth. If you hire the best employees, you'll do it successfully.

Q. How do you attract the right employees?

We looked at the personality traits and characteristics of the individuals we

all wanted on our teams. So we put those together in a list, and when we presented the plan to our staff members, we told them the characteristics a successful team member will have. The way to attract additional quality employees is by first creating a culture your own staff members love, then they will spread the word.

When we interview people, we have various team members interview them. If you don't have people who love the company interviewing, then you won't be able to attract great employees. So our goal is to keep the team members we have now motivated and happy in a culture they enjoy.

Then they, themselves, will attract great employees. We've hired excellent people, and they know excellent people.

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