April 2012

Take The Lead

Yes, you can be a better boss, and our experts show you how.

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Company owners, managers and supervisors whose businesses are starting to grow again need to sharpen their leadership skills to a gleaming pinpoint, because realizing the potential of every single one of their employees will make the difference between bumping along and full-fledged recovery.

Employee engagement—that feeling of loyalty to one’s company—is on the decline, the experts say. According to a 2011 “What Works” survey by international human resources consulting company Mercer, nearly a third of U.S. employees report that they want to leave their current position. The bad news, revealed in a recent national poll of 3,000 hiring managers by Harris Interactive: 43 percent believe that their top performers, those with the best reputations and most options for other employment, are the most likely to leave this year.

“We spend more on machine maintenance than we invest in our employees,” chides Pat Mathews of Workplace Solutions Pros, a Sarasota-based HR consultancy.
Mathews’ overarching message: “Your employees are your strategic competitive advantage.”

But what does investing in your employees mean? Yes, it’s about providing on-the-job training and other advancement opportunities. But it’s also about encouraging buy-in, fostering workplace engagement, making employees feel that they matter, and then coaching them to reach their fullest potential.

“Paying your employees enough is important,” says David Auxier, director of Workforce Solutions at State College of Florida, which offers a multitude of leadership classes for both current and aspiring managers. “But money’s not the big driver,” Auxier says, citing workplace expert and best-selling author Daniel Pink. “It’s feeling a sense of mastery in your field, feeling you’re valued and respected, that you’re contributing to the organization’s bottom line.”

Terri Groening of Kaleidoscope Solutions, an HR coaching and consulting company, and 2012 president of the Sarasota-Manatee Human Resources Association, agrees. “The best employer I ever worked for was clear on the direction they wanted to go and combined that clarity with showing me I was seen as a valued employee,” she says. “I wasn’t working for them, I was working with them.”

Experts say three qualities—firmness, fairness and consistency—are paramount to being a good business leader. Beyond that, the answer to what makes a great boss has shifted over the years, says Joe O’Haver, assistant director of State College of Florida’s Workplace Solutions. “Now it’s someone who has overlapping complementary skills: They have the capacity to monitor, direct, control and focus on the present; coupled with someone who has persuasion; the capacity to look forward; is proactive rather than reactive; and has emotional intelligence—the ability to tap into how their behaviors and attitudes affect their employees.”

Oh, and there’s the changing nature of the workforce, too, which makes long-distance leadership a necessity for some. “Twenty years ago we almost never heard from an employer that five of their employees are in North Carolina, two are in Switzerland and
10 are in Guatemala,” says O'Haver. “More local companies are participating in international trade, so that’s more common now.”

When it comes right down to it, says Auxier, “Leadership is all about helping people perform better, and the investment in human capital is the difference between economic success and economic backwater.”

**Great bosses**

*Leadership tips from Auxier and O'Haver:*

> Articulate what’s expected of their employees in a nonthreatening way. They’re not just cheerleaders; they hold their employees accountable to clearly defined high standards.

> Have the ability to conduct an objective self-assessment in an un-whitewashed way: “They say, ‘These are the areas that constitute strengths for me,’ and they’re able to tap them when needed,” says Auxier. And, conversely, fairly assess their challenges.

> Influence and leverage talents. They take stock of the talent pool and figure out how to maximize the potential for these people to be fully engaged.

> Demonstrate resilience, tenacity and optimism.

> Are sensitive to what people really want through their work. “They ask, ‘What are the values all of us share in terms of worth, being part of something bigger than ourselves?’ These are the leaders who maximize the potential of keeping good people,” says O’Haver.

> Show flexibility. “Don’t be wed to a particular approach” when you’re dealing with an employee situation, says Auxier. “It’s about bringing the right tool to the right circumstance. Rigidity is our enemy. There are occasions when effective leaders have
to have a direct controlling response, and other times they have to back away and be the persuader-inspirer kind of leader."