

Managing Personnel Issues

by Chris Burand

I have not discovered an agency owner yet who became an agency owner so he or she could manage people. Managing people was never their goal—it just came with the job and it can be tough. It is no wonder then that so many agency owners consider it the worst part of their job. Tough personnel situations are time and energy consuming.

Choose Wisely

A great starting place for easing personnel issues is with good hiring practices. I hear a lot of agents say, “Hire for attitude,” and many are reporting great improvements in their teams. Be careful though not to interpret this as hiring only agreeable people. While I have seen some agencies improve their staff, I have also seen agencies identify the wrong attitudes they wanted to hire.

I heard two managers of very large facilities talking about whether they prefer smart, creative, productive employees, albeit ones that might be difficult to manage, or happy team players that go with the flow. They agreed, as so many agency owners would also agree, that easy employees are preferred. Going along and getting along are the preferred traits. This reminds me of a movie scene about cute lemmings going along and getting along all the way over the cliff.

Occasionally I will work with an agency where no employee has offered any constructive criticism to agency management for many years. Everyone (except maybe the owner) is aware of major, easily identifiable problems. The employees, though, cannot tell the emperor he has no clothes. Hiring for attitude is great, but if you are about to go over a cliff, wouldn't you want your employees to speak up?

As with most things, a person cannot have it both ways. An office full of docile employees is not an ideal solution. Neither is an office full of strong-willed, “do it my way” employees. If an agency is going to “hire for attitude,” consider which attitude is desirable for the specific position, rather than selecting one attitude for the entire agency.

If one of the attitudes you want to hire is someone that takes ownership and works for the agency's benefit, make sure you are willing to listen to constructive criticism. Taking criticism is always tough but constructive criticism and advice from employees shows the employees care about the agency. Employees that care about their workplace is a great characteristic to build upon.

Worry Not

I have observed that agency owners often worry excessively about personnel issues and much of this worrying is wasted energy. Sometimes they disguise the worry under the umbrella of, “I'm gathering more information about the situation before taking action.” or “I'm carefully considering all the alternatives so I can make the right decision.” I like to believe that if a person thinks long and hard enough about a problem, they will eventually discover a better solution. In most of these cases though, the owner is just procrastinating the ultimate decision they know they must make.

Most often, if an employee is inadequately performing, all the worrying never cures the problem. When the painful decision is made to finally handle the problem though, the worry drains away. Either the employee improves or the owner finds it easier to take the required next step.

In many of these situations, other employees are paying the penalty for management inaction. Excessive worrying tends to pinpoint the worrier's focus on accommodating the problem employee, rather than considering the entire agency's welfare. By taking action then, everyone else in the agency may experience an improved environment.

Additionally, excessive worry probably will not change the final action. We often worry because we do not have adequate confidence in our decision. But even if we are wrong, provided we communicate our decision adequately, the decision acts as a catalyst for finding the right solution. Personnel issues are rarely easy, but just worrying does not help one find that solution. Action does.

Agency owners are not usually owners just so they can manage people. This is a big reason to address issues head on without procrastination. The more proactive a person is in managing their people, the more likely the number of personnel headaches will decrease.

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