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taking the lead

How innovative leadership can spell the difference between boom and doom for many small businesses

Leadership and micro-business aren't often thought to go together. Given the crises that seem to pop up each week in small businesses—whether you're a plumber with one assistant or a baker with 19—the most pressing matters seem to lend themselves more to the immediacy of crisis management than to a deliberate, forward-thinking vision. In truth, you just have to know where to look for leadership opportunities—and there's no better place to start than among your employees, experts say.

BY SCOTT S. SMITH



case study #1

Amy Bermar

president

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When Amy Bermar set up her Newton, Mass., technology PR firm, the former news reporter made the typical mistake of thinking that she had to perform everyone else's job in addition to her own. "We start out as independents, then we hire because we have too much work, but we tend to think we still have to do everything," she says. "I was too impatient to be a good manager, and I was getting irritated with how others were doing their work."

But good leadership, she says, demands that a businessperson know how to delegate. When she figured this out, Bermar began turning over more responsibilities to her staff, realizing that she didn't need to know every detail about every account that her company took on. "It's a team effort," she says. "As I recently heard at a seminar, if you're doing all the work, you're not leading the business."

Moreover, she says, all of the members of her staff are gaining valuable leadership experience by participating in the decision-making on critical issues and by setting goals for the company and themselves. "Leadership is not about always having the right answers," Bermar observes. "It's about finding a way to get them. By working together to

work out solutions, no one feels imposed on with the result, and we share ownership of success."

Bermar, who had never run a PR firm before starting her own, has made up for her lack of experience by engaging in peer-to-peer mentoring through a CEO forum, The Commonwealth Institute in Boston. For four hours a month, she listens to six to 10 other women discuss their professional challenges. She views this as a major boost to her efforts to be a better leader. "I can get away from putting out fires and think strategically," says Bermar.

Her on-going leadership education has also taught Bermar to offer incentives to keep her best workers. In an industry fraught with high turnover, she's held onto many employees not just with better-than-average pay, bonuses, profit-sharing and four-week vacations—but also with a new sabbatical program.

"About four to six years is when there is the greatest risk of leaving, so we give them three weeks off in that period to do something completely unrelated to their work," says Bermar.

While a worker is gone, his or her colleagues learn to take on more tasks and hone their abilities. When the worker does come back, he or she returns rejuvenated and eager to contribute.