

# How to Cultivate an Attitude of Ownership

## Among Your Employees

By Randi Busse

In

business, customers can experience varying levels of service depending on who is representing the company they are dealing with. There are times when I call a business such as a limousine service and I know right away whether I am on the phone with the owner or an employee. I don't know this by hearing the person's name, but by his tone or whether he is abrupt or not. Have you ever noticed the difference in the level of service and attention you receive from an owner as opposed to an employee? If your experience was like mine, the owner made you feel valued and appreciated, making small talk and asking for the sale with confidence, treating you as if you were the only client. Some of you who are owners out there might even admit to being biased—preferring to speak directly to a company owner first because you know you'll be handled well.

How does this differ from the experience we might get from an employee? Employees sometimes act indifferent toward clients and their concerns, and oftentimes don't care whether or not the client books the ride. Sadly, this is the culture that is created when employees are not given the power to act and think like an owner. Unfortunately, many employees see themselves as one-dimensional in relation to their company—as a salesperson, or a reservationist, or a supervisor—instead of as an essential part of the big picture. Someone who doesn't feel like an integral part of the team could have one underwhelming interaction with a client and lose that account for the company.

Now imagine for a moment if every time your customers dealt with your service they felt valued and appreciated and were treated as if they were your only customer no matter with whom they are speaking. I'll bet they would not only continue doing business with your company, but they would also tell their family and friends about it as well.

The key is to motivate employees to think and act like owners of the business. Employees should share the same beliefs in their abilities and in the purpose of your business as you do. Employees need to realize that their own professional success is a direct result of the success of the company of which they are part. That is the power of an ownership culture and you can have it in your organization.

If employees acted like owners, customers would never again

hear excuses like, "That's not my job, it's not my department, and they don't pay me to do that." These words are the sign of a person who not only doesn't love his work, but also doesn't have an owner mentality. So without giving actual stock certificates to your employees, how do you get them to think and act like owners?

**Look in the mirror.** Examine how you treat your employees. The way you treat them is the way they will treat your customers.

As the owner, you should set the tone and model the behavior that you want your staff to exemplify. Treat your employees well and they will do the same to your customers. Yell, scream, or talk down to your employees and you can almost guarantee that they will do the same to your clients. Your staff will feed off of your energy in the office. Positive reinforcement can make a big impact as well, translating into more sales and better attitudes overall.

**Empower your employees.** Eliminate the "policies and procedures" that get in the way of them thinking and acting like an owner. Give them the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to not only do their jobs, but also to go above

and beyond, especially when it comes to dealing with your customers. Oftentimes when a client is upset and they ask to speak with the owner, the customer winds up getting exactly what they wanted in the first place. Why put your client (and your employee) through that? Tell your employees, "I want you to handle it like you own the business. You're a smart person. You'll do the right thing." Just watch what happens with performance when you express sincere confidence in this way to your employees. They will soon become owners. You can set boundaries or give them guidelines, but the emphasis should be on empowering them. When people are empowered they don't look up the hierarchy for answers, they take responsibility to solve problems where they occur. They have the freedom to act and are also accountable for the results. When a mistake is made, they do whatever it takes to recover.

Realize too that this step is only possible if you are willing to let go of some control. Owners who cannot delegate will never be able to have employees with an owner mentality.



**Keep open communication.** Talk about what's going on in your organization with your employees: the good, the bad, and the ugly. There's nothing worse for an employee than to hear it secondhand or worse yet, from a client. Your employees are the frontline and have the most interaction with your customers. It's important for them to have the information they need to respond

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appropriately to your customers. Prepare them for everything. Make them look good and they'll make the company look good.

Ask your employees for their feedback: what's working, what's not, what clients like, what they are complaining about. Regular staff meetings are a great way to pick your employees' brains. They have the inside scoop on what your customers are saying. Imagine if you tapped your employees for their insider knowledge. You could transform your business and give clients what they really want. And in the process, you are engaging your employ-

ees and making them realize that they are an important part of the team. Give your staff the freedom to mention things that they think could be done differently either in the open forum of a staff meeting or in a suggestion box in the office.

Don't neglect the opportunity to communicate when someone has done a job well. Share good news in a company-wide e-mail, and if the entire office has a particularly profitable month, reward them with lunch or gift cards. You'd be surprised how little things like this will keep everyone motivated.

You have to carefully breed a culture where employees feel they can take risks, implement their ideas without discouraging amounts of bureaucracy, and benefit personally from the outcome of their actions. Your employees are the most important asset your company has. Treat them that way and you will create a culture that has everyone acting like an owner. Who do YOU want to deal with when you do business with a company? I'll bet it's an owner. Now those with an ownership mentality can be working for your company too. Your customers will be glad you do! **LD**



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