

20 steps to leadership success

Noel Penrose shares 20 actions that can help business owners rejuvenate their company.

"The economy is healing", claimed chancellor George Osborne when announcing GDP growth in the third quarter. But with small business lending down, living standards falling and more tax rises on the way, the wolf remains startlingly close to the door for many owner-managers. Here are 20 actions to help your business survive and thrive:

1. Watch your attitude. As the owner-manager, you set the tone for all aspects of your business. People will take their cue from you. If you're worried, they'll be worried. Set an enthusiastic example because your way of thinking will cascade down throughout the company.
2. Communicate openly and often. People need to know what is expected of them, where they're going and why. This is particularly true in difficult times. Try to give a sense of optimism about the future. Remember, communication is a two-way process. Make sure the communication flow comes back to give you good information too.
3. Be a team, not a collection of individuals. Avoid breeding a culture of 'winners' in your company as that can create too much competition. You need a balance of people who can work well together. Look for those with creative flair, as well as problem-solvers and completer-finishers.
4. Match people's talents to their role. People want their work to be challenging, interesting and fun. If you understand their strengths, you can motivate them by allocating tasks that match their skills and interests. Help them feel that the time they spend at work is worthwhile.
5. Guide, don't direct. Give people autonomy and responsibility. Let them learn by experience. Give them opportunities to develop their skills and to advance their careers. Don't manipulate people or take them for granted. Your employees will go the extra mile for you, if you bring out the best in them.
6. Recognise and reward good performance. We all want to be recognised, appreciated and reassured. Praising people generates enthusiasm and builds loyalty. Tell people when they've done a good job. Provide coaching for anyone who needs to improve.
7. Challenge received wisdom to develop new solutions. George Bernard Shaw said: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable man."
8. Walk the floor. Get amongst the people at the sharp end. Try to identify any barriers to success. What have customers been saying? If you really want to know what's wrong with your business, you won't need to look any further. Customer comments offer an unparalleled source of market information and a chance to proactively improve your products, processes or your communications.

9. Manage internal conflict. Conflict is a healthy consequence of group dynamics. But don't let conflict get out of hand and turn into personal attacks. Encourage people to focus on the problem not the personalities.
10. Pick your battles. If you're going to make a stand, make it for something worthwhile. Don't get overly animated about little things that aren't terribly important.
11. Identify and challenge anyone who sucks out energy from the business. Negativity can spread like wildfire. Nip it in the bud by making the culprits aware of the impact they're having.
12. Make your meetings upbeat and inspirational. Set and agree clear goals and energise people to perform. Hold onto the vision and values of the business while you work together towards your goals. Stay flexible so you can respond to any opportunities that may arise.
13. Take pride in your output. Know when 'good enough' is good enough and stop wasting time and effort. Persistence is an important quality but know when to quit on something that's never going to work.
14. Find ways to say yes. It's easy to say no to suggestions but even the wildest ideas can have interesting possibilities. Say 'why not?' instead of 'why?'
15. Be decisive when push comes to shove. Take account of people's views but remember that the buck stops with you. You have to make the tough decisions. But when you need help, be big enough to ask for it.
16. Ensure the work environment is conducive. People won't give you their best if their workplace is ill-equipped, uncomfortable or unsafe. Get the conditions right.
17. Learn from any mistakes. It's practically impossible for any business to get everything right on every occasion. Mistakes are inevitable but treat them as a learning opportunity. People will only be willing to take risks in an environment where smart mistakes are tolerated as the price of progress.
18. Trust your instincts and believe in yourself. Dealing with ambiguity and stress can be emotionally draining. It's easy to let self-doubt slow you down or derail your ambition. Stay focused. Sometimes it can help to have a 'sounding board' associate who can challenge and support you. Occasionally changing your normal routine can also help keep your mind fresh.
19. Don't be daunted by what seems impossible. Big problems can always be broken down into smaller parts.
20. Manage your time. Don't confuse activity with progress. We spend a lot of time being busy. Make what you do count.

*Noel Penrose is chairman of **Juniper2**, an independent consultancy that helps owner-managers to build their business and improve profitability.*