



SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

White Horse Plains

Community Futures Development Corporation



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Ethics at Work?

Six Reasons for Considering an Ethical Workplace

Ethical business and/or workplace ethics is a hot topic these days. More and more organizations are springing up enlisting businesses to join them under the umbrella of ethical businesses practices, products and services. Ethics consultants are being hired in droves by companies to help them see how they can establish ethical workplaces. But just because it's hot, does it mean it's good, and is it something you should be paying attention to in your business? You will need to answer that question yourself, but here's some food for thought. For some, the desire for ethical business practices may come from having experienced unethical business practices. They want everyone connected with their business to know that they don't have to worry about that issue. For others, it's simply an affirmation of what they're already doing - they run ethical businesses but having documentation that outlines their policy on ethics, formalizes the fact that they're doing it. If you've never thought about it before, here are a few reasons to consider building an ethical workplace.

1. **Ethical business practices improve society**

Fair wages, workplace safety, discrimination, sexism, child labour - are all issues that have been addressed as a result of business ethics. This stems from an increasing willingness by employees and employers to address things that are unfair in the workplace, rather than sweep them under the rug. Workplace practices now reflect a much higher standard than they did several decades ago.

2. **Ethics programs cultivate strong teamwork and increase productivity**

An ethical business program is built on the moral and ethical values of its leaders. Your business ethics will reflect your values and what's important to you. If you're a savvy business owner, you hire people who believe in and support those values, and who are willing to reflect the behaviours and standards of those ethical values. When everyone knows where they stand, and what happens if they fall outside of the ethical lines set for the business, there is a sense of fairness and congruence among



staff. A common purpose, shared vision and clear expectations all contribute to a strong team, and a desire on behalf of team members to do well for the company, resulting in greater productivity.

3. **Ethics programs protect everyone**

If workplace ethics are clearly laid out in company policy, and if employees have agreed to those policies, legal action against employers becomes more difficult. On the other hand, ethics also protect employees from the unethical business practices of their employers. Not too many business owners are will agree to write down their unethical practices in a document. If a company supports ethical business practices, everyone wins.

4. **Ethical business practices provide a moral compass for the company**

Because ethics are values-based, they will not move with the winds of change. They won't change as new technology arises, they won't change when staff or management come and go, they won't change when others in the industry do. They are like a beacon that defines who you are as a business, and how you function, no matter what else is going on around you. This sets a strong foundation for your business and allows you to function in your industry with integrity and stability.

5. **Ethics programs help you manage your business**

In every area of your business - policy, production, service, administration, planning - your ethics guide you. They are the foundation of everything that happens in your business. Spelling out your workplace ethics means that those principles guide your decisions in every area. It means your managers know what decision you'd make in any given circumstance, and follow suit. It means employees know how you want them to behave. It means everyone knows and agrees with how you want to run your business.

6. **An ethical business projects a strong public image**

You will become known by your practices. If people know you will honour your contracts, put out only the highest quality products, value them as customers, do what you can to make things right when they go wrong, they will make a decision about whether to do business with you. Ethical business practices are valued by the public, and can only improve your business success.

An ethical organization consists of the following principles:

- They value diversity
- They are zealously committed to fairness
- They focus on individual rather than collective responsibility
- They don't do anything that isn't tied to their overall purpose
- They have a clear vision
- They insist on integrity at every organizational level

Maybe you're already applying ethical principles in your business. Why not formalize it? Why not create an ethical business program or policy that clarifies those things and puts it down in writing so everyone in your company knows about it? If you haven't thought about this concept before, maybe it's time to do some work around clarifying your values and what it means to you to be an ethical business. Overall, it's just the right thing to do, but with the advantages listed above, it may also be the profitable thing to do.

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The Customer Service Survey

Your Greatest Tool for Meaningful Change

Recently, some friends and I frequented a local downtown restaurant for dinner on a busy Saturday night. Although the place was packed, they found us a table right away. One member of our party had with him a special chair due to a back injury, and without a moment's hesitation or a strange look, they accommodated our special need. The service was polite and attentive without being overbearing. The server was knowledgeable about the menu items and able to recommend many things that she had tried herself. In spite of what was obviously a very busy evening the food was served quickly, and the menu items we chose were spectacular all around. Before we'd had a chance to order dessert, the server dropped four five-dollar-off certificates for our next visit to the restaurant onto the table. We ordered dessert and coffee, and were again pleased with the delicious items we ordered. When the server brought the bill, a brief survey about our experience at the restaurant was tucked into the leather folder. How do you think they fared on their survey?

When was the last time you were asked for your opinion? By your spouse, your kids, your employees? It feels pretty good doesn't it? It makes you feel valued and appreciated for your contribution to another person's life when they ask for your opinion. Guess what - your customers feel the same way about your business! The customer service survey is an often underused but highly effective tool to bring about meaningful change to your business. After all, if you're not pleasing your customers, you won't be in business for very long. So ask them what they think of you! If you're already providing great service you have nothing to fear, and will get some great testimonials for future marketing. If you're falling short in some areas, be grateful someone is willing to tell you about them so that they can be rectified, ensuring better service in the future and increased loyalty and referrals from your customers.

There are many ways to go about this. You can create a simple survey yourself, hire a consultant, or look online. There are dozens of survey companies that provide samples and templates of service surveys that you can use or adapt to your specific industry. Here are a few principles to remember when creating your survey.

Keep it simple

Make it as easy as possible for your customers to participate. Surveys should be relatively short (never more than two pages) and easy to understand. People generally prefer multiple-choice questions over ones that require writing. Complicated grids or too many choices can also be overwhelming. Yes or no questions, or multiple-choice with no more than 5 options, work very well. Your language needs to be consumer-oriented, so be conscious of industry jargon. These are customers, not suppliers or competitors. The easier your survey is to complete, the greater participation will be.

Know what you want to find out - the more specific the better

Do you need information on how your front-line staff is dealing with customers, or do you want to know about product quality? Maybe you'd like to know how your service department is meeting your customers' needs. Perhaps you'd like their opinion on how your product or service is priced within the market. If you try to cover too much in a single survey it's bound to become too complicated or too long. It's better to do several specific surveys over the course of the year than to try to cram too much into one.

Always ask the most important question

Do you know what that question is? *"What can we do to improve our service to you?"* Use some variation of this question at the end of every survey, because it allows customers to comment on the things that are really important to them. Your survey may be about product quality, but if they've



had a bad experience in your service department they're going to want to tell you about it. That question gives them permission to tell you whatever it is that they want. And believe me, they want to tell you! Occasionally, you can ask them to tell you what you're doing right, although people on surveys rarely fill out the answer to that question.

Keep the promises you've implied in your survey

If you ask a customer for their opinion on a specific aspect of your service, you're implying that you plan to do something about it. If 50% of your customers tell you that Joe Smith in your parts department is rude and doesn't listen, but nothing happens to change Joe's behaviour, you're telling your customers that what they've said didn't really matter. Of course you may not be able to implement every single suggestion that is offered, but customers who take the time to answer your questions expect that you'll do something with the information they've shared. Don't ask questions about anything you aren't willing to look at changing.

Show your appreciation

Enter each survey participant's name in a prize draw, send a personal letter thanking them for their contribution, offer a discount coupon for their next service or purchase (like the restaurant did with us). Be creative in how you do it, but don't ignore this important step. Doesn't it feel good when someone thanks you for your opinion and lets you know how it impacted a decision they made? The same goes for your customers. If you are taking steps to improve some aspect of your business as a direct result of the survey responses, let them know. They'll feel so important and appreciated they'll never leave you for your competitor!

So, where do you need to improve? What information is missing in your customer service plan? Ask the people who know - the ones who are spending money in your store or business, and you'll get meaningful information that will help you to improve your service, build customer loyalty and gain new customers.

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Building Your Business

"Dream Team"

What do you think of when you hear the words dream team? Usually, we use that term in reference to a sports team that has achieved exceptional status because it is made up of exceptional players - players that have been chosen for their specific strengths and unusual talent to augment the functioning of the team. What about applying the principles of a dream team to your business? How would your business success improve if you were part of a team that supported you where you had weaknesses, that offered wisdom and expertise in areas where you had less knowledge, that had the courage to tell you when you weren't giving 100% or were veering off track? It's easier than you think to accomplish a business dream team, and if you're serious about growing your business, you might want to take a look at how the concept could work for you. Here are just a few ideas to help you get started.

Establish guidelines and a purpose

If you want people to join you in a team venture, you need to know what you want to accomplish and how you will do it. Before you ask people to commit to something, have at least a purpose statement in your mind. It might be as simple as "working together to build up and enhance business growth through strategic partnerships". People are much more likely to participate if it

seems as if you know what you're doing! Also, although you may eventually discuss the details with your team once you've got them enlisted, have in mind some general guidelines as to how you think the process will work. Will you meet together once a month over dinner? Weekly over lunch? Every second Saturday? How long will the meetings go? What do you hope to accomplish? How will it benefit participants? You might even want to prepare a one-page synopsis of your concept to clarify it in your own mind. It will also help others to focus when you're talking to them.

Forge specific and positive partnerships

The reason a dream team works is that each player on the team offers a specific strength. On a basketball team, you wouldn't have all forwards, even though their job is to score. You need the guards to do their job in order to defend against the other team. When you're thinking about asking people to be part of your business team, think of areas of expertise you don't have. If your areas of weakness are strategic planning, or financial management, or perhaps marketing then look for team members that can fill those knowledge gaps. Ask them if they'd like to join you in forming a business partnership that could benefit you both. Let them know the specific area of expertise you see that they could contribute to the team. Let them know what kind of a commitment it would involve (weekly, monthly, quarterly meetings) and your purpose for putting together the team. Choose people who are positive. If your friend Susan is a brilliant accountant, but is like a wet blanket because of her negativity, you might want to keep looking. Your team needs to consist of like-minded, unique individuals who will contribute positively to the process.



Quickly establish reciprocity

You may be putting together this team to enhance your own business growth, but others may want to know how they will benefit from becoming involved. Let potential partners know that your goal is that everyone on the team will benefit from its collective wisdom and expertise.

Meetings will address issues everyone is facing so all will benefit from the process. That puts everyone on an equal footing, and instantly establishes an important peer partnership.

Clearly be the host - at least at the beginning

In the formation of a new venture, there needs to be a clear leader. Even though you are establishing a peer team, someone needs to take the reins, at least until the group is established. Be willing to organize the meetings, provide for niceties like beverages or snacks, have a clear agenda for each meeting and be a good meeting chair. Don't allow meetings to move beyond the agreed timeframe whenever possible. You may find that as your team gels, others will be willing to take on some of the responsibilities and you can divide up the "chores" amongst you, but initially, take initiative in hosting the process.

Honour your commitment and invest in your team

If it is to work, the guards and the forwards (in our basketball example) need to work together - each doing their jobs well so the others can work to their areas of strength. The result is a team that wins. You expect that those you've partnered with will be there to support you in your business endeavours, but you must also be willing to do the same for them. It has to be about how everyone will benefit or it won't work. Be willing to go the extra mile for your team member, even if it may be inconvenient for you. You'll find they'll be willing to do the same for you when your time comes. If you are an example of an invested team member, and if you've chosen the right people, they'll reciprocate that investment. Down the road if the team is really working, you may even want to invest financially. Plan a weekend retreat to focus on some specific business issues team members are facing (along with a little golf or a spa package just for fun!). You may want to start a group project based on collective interests, or contribute to a charity or local event as a group. There's no limit to what synergy can accomplish!

Establishing a business dream team can take you to a whole new level in your business. Not only will you become part of something that's bigger than yourself - providing new perspectives, fresh ideas and unlimited support - but you'll also know how good it feels to give that to someone else. Give it a try and see whether you can establish something amazing in your community that others will want to emulate. Establish a dream team for your business and you may just find yourself heading for the

gold!

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The Critical Cause

5 Steps to Reduce the Sting and Find Value in Criticism

It's happened to all of us at some time or other. Someone gives us a piece of helpful "advice", but it feels more like we've been pushed in front of an oncoming truck. The advice is really politely masked criticism, but we don't acknowledge it as such. We smile and nod and thank them for their feedback, and close the door behind us so no one sees us licking our wounds. Or, maybe it is an outright attack in front of a group of colleagues. However it comes to us, criticism is never easy to deal with. Even the most savvy, confident, and bold among us feel the sting of being criticized. And that concept of "constructive" criticism? Although it may be intended to be constructive, it doesn't feel much different than the other kind. Criticism is part of life, and how we deal with it can make the difference between withering and weathering. If we allow criticism to pierce our core and begin to value ourselves less because of it, we will wither inside and become ineffective. If however, we learn to see some value in the critical words, even the ones we think were unfair or unwarranted, we can weather the judgmental storm and use the grains of truth, no matter how small, to make us stronger.

As a small business owner, that criticism may come from a customer, an employee, a manager, or a business partner. It may even come from a competitor, or your bank manager, or your investor. Learning how to discard what's not true and learn from what is, can really impact your business in a positive way. Here are 5 tips for dealing with criticism the next time it's levelled at you.

1. **Maintain your emotional balance**

A valuable (if hard to acquire) skill is the ability to separate yourself emotionally from the comments being made and the person making them. If all your hot buttons are being pushed and you feel your blood pressure rising, chances are you'll do or say something that will make things worse. Recognize that after it's all been said, you can evaluate, accept or reject what you please. It's your choice. Allowing your emotions to get the better of you in the moment rarely makes things better. Two things that contribute to keeping your emotional balance are stifling your natural instinct to deny or defend and defying the urge to counterattack. When we feel attacked there is an immediate instinct to deny the allegations or to defend our position. Trying to defend yourself weakens your position before you've had a chance to think about it. When someone criticizes you, it's also natural to want to fight back. If you allow either of those things to take over, you will undoubtedly regret what happens. There is usually some truth in a critical comment, and there is also garbage, but in the heat of the moment it's hard to tell one from the other. After you've had time to think it over, you may find there is value in what's been said. If you want, you can go back to the person and talk further about it, get clarification or simply thank them for showing you something you didn't see. If you feel it's completely unwarranted, you won't have said anything you'll look



back on with regret. No matter how bad the criticism is, take the high road.

2. Determine the spirit of the criticism

Was this person trying to get back at you for a decision you made that impacted them negatively? Or were they genuine in their desire to see an improvement, even if their comments hurt? Evaluating the motive for the criticism can sometimes help you to see the truth more clearly.

3. Separate opinions from facts

If someone tells you they think you're a selfish jerk, that's an opinion. If they tell you that the way you yelled at them in front of their colleagues made them feel belittled, that's a fact. When criticism is given, it is usually one of those two. Opinions are difficult to deal with, but facts can be dealt with in a concrete way. Sometimes you can draw out facts from someone who is giving you opinions, (for example, asking the criticizer *"why do you think I'm a selfish jerk?"* may lead them to disclose the facts behind their opinion), and those facts can be very helpful in dealing with the situation that caused the critical comment. There is a third category that sits in between opinion and fact, and that is criticism that is intended to instruct. Say your business partner comes to you and says *"Jim, I've noticed that when things get heated in our staff meetings, you tend to raise your voice. I know it's not your intention to belittle the staff, but I think sometimes it comes across that way. I've seen staff members leave those meetings looking dejected and discouraged. Do you think you could be more aware of that in the future so we can maintain the great morale we have here?"* He's given you his opinion that your behaviour is negatively affecting your staff, but he's offered concrete evidence as to why he thinks that. You then can choose to deal with the facts that have been given.

4. Accept responsibility for what is true, discard what isn't

No one likes to hear ugly things about themselves, but the truth is, none of us is perfect, and all of us have traits, behaviours and methods that are less than exemplary from time to time. If you really looked at the criticism objectively and see some grains of truth, acknowledge it to yourself and the other person, and be responsible about dealing with it. If you have a habit of being sarcastic and sharp with others when you're under stress and someone points out that destructive behaviour, be thankful that it was brought to your attention before it really gets you into trouble. If you can acknowledge and accept responsibility for the truth, it makes it easy to discard the rest.

5. Choose your response thoughtfully

If you have found some truth in the criticism, what do you need to do about it? Is there someone to whom you need to apologize? Is there some way you need to modify your behaviour? Is there a situation you need to correct or rectify? Do you need to go back to the person for clarification? Do you need to do some work in a specific area of your life? Allow the truth in the criticism to propel you toward positive change. It's all within your control, and your response will say volumes to other people about who you are.

The next time you get pushed in front of the criticism truck, remember these five steps. They will guide you through a process of growth rather than destroy your confidence. Handling criticism graciously is a trait that others will admire. It will increase your credibility and integrity in the business community, which ultimately, is good for business!

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How to Think Like an Alien

Find a Fresh Perspective on Your Business

My brother-in-law lived his entire life on the prairies. The farthest he'd ever traveled was a few hours east and west of the city in which he grew up. The largest mountain he'd ever seen was the community toboggan hill. After many phone calls, much pleading, and promises of a fabulous west coast vacation, we convinced him and my sister to come for a visit, and they decided on a road trip. When he describes his experience of driving through the Rocky Mountains for the first time in his life, he struggles to find the words. He'd seen mountains in photographs, he'd seen them in movies and on TV, but it all paled in comparison to actually driving through those mountain passes, experiencing the magnificence of the towering white-peaked giants, feeling the awe of his smallness in the midst of the incredible grandeur. For him, it was an almost spiritual experience. To some degree we all take where we live for granted. I've been told countless times that I'm lucky to live in such a beautiful part of the world as Vancouver Island. And yet, going about my business, it's easy to look past the breathtaking beauty that's in my line of vision every day.

We can become a little blinded sometimes as life takes us from one step to the next, not realizing the significance of where we are, or imagining how it can be any different. I have a book on my bookshelf called *"Pencil Dancing - New Ways to Free Your Creative Spirit"* by Mari Messer. It's a book about writing actually, but I've been able to apply the creativity principles to many areas of my life and business. In the 8th chapter, Messer encourages her readers to "think like an alien". She's talking about looking at things as if you've never seen them before, in order to discover some things you might be missing. I think this principle can be applied to your business too. Think about looking at your business from a completely new perspective. Take yourself out of the "thick of it", and watch how it works from afar - as if you're seeing it for the first time. You might gain some fresh new insights you would never have seen had you remained stuck on the inside. Here are a few ideas to spark a shift in perspective.

Seek perspective and advice from unlikely sources

In the book, Messer tells the story of the stuck truck. An optimistic truck driver tried to muscle his rig through the opening under a low bridge that spanned the highway. His truck got stuck under the bridge. Within minutes, traffic had backed up for miles. Experts converged on the truck like flies to raw meat. They offered crowbars and cranes, and tried different ways to pull and push, but the truck remained stuck. Finally, a small boy wandered over. Beside the truck he could barely see over the edge of the huge tires - that was his perspective. So, the boy suggested the driver let some air out of the tires. He did, and it was just enough to free the truck and allow it to move beyond the bridge. The point of the story says Messer, is that sometimes the best solutions come from the most unlikely places. Talk to people in your company whom you would normally never ask for advice. Stop seeing yourself as the expert and look for others who may be standing right next to the tires, just waiting to give you the solution you need to move forward.



Don't be afraid to see the truth

In every business there are sacred cows. Those things that have always been done that way, things no one wants, or has the courage to challenge or change, things that may for all intents and purposes, be working just fine. But the more sacred cows you have, the farther you are from true growth. Remember the story about the Emperor's new clothes? The Emperor paraded through the town naked, rather than admit he didn't really see the clothing the con-men wove for him, valuing his ego more than the truth. The same can be true in your business if you're not careful. Are you so wrapped up in believing that the way things are in your business, are the way they should be that you can't see areas where you could improve? Are you willing to see the things that aren't going well and address them? Are you open to looking at the truth about your business rather than walking around naked? Taking a hard look at the things you feel are sacred may just lead you towards a growth area you never even imagined.

Look at things in your business as if you've never seen them before

Take a fresh look at your processes, your policies, your strategies, your finances, and your future plans. Look for those things you might have missed when you weren't specifically looking for them. Ask someone else to help you look with unprejudiced, unbiased eyes. Remove every assumption you've ever made about your business - pretend you're an alien seeing your business for the first time. Your customer service, your quality control, your staff, your reputation in the industry - what do you notice? What appears right? What appears wrong?

Taking a fresh look at your business can help you to discover big things (like letting a little air out of the tires to solve a big problem), and things that may seem small but still have an impact. For example, that puddle that forms in front of your storefront door when it rains may seem insignificant, but to your customers it's an annoyance they may go down the street to your competitor to avoid. Paying attention to that small detail may benefit your business in big ways. Your discoveries will lead you toward making your business better. All it takes is a new perspective.

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