



# SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

*White Horse Plains*

Community Futures Development Corporation



March 2006

[Six Steps to Effectively Delivering Criticism](#) | [Lightning Stress Relievers](#)  
[Outside-the-Box Interview Strategies](#) | [Problem-Solving Sales Techniques](#)

## The Business Owner's Guide to an Effective Retreat

**A** retreat? Who has time for that? Certainly no business owner I know! And yet, those who have discovered the benefit of regularly getting away will tell you that it is the retreat that keeps them sane, and moves them toward a stronger, healthier business in the long run. It's understandable that at first glance it might seem impossible to take large chunks of time away from your business to rest, evaluate, strategize, and energize, but those who do, swear by it. So what would it take for you to build "retreating" into your business plan? It doesn't necessarily have to be a long time away (although it can be), but you might find it so beneficial after you try it, that you'll find yourself booking them regularly! Read on for some ideas on how to create an effective retreat that you'll find rejuvenating and revitalizing!

### Why retreat?

That's a good question. The reason for a retreat is to set aside a specific amount of time to focus on things in your business that need your attention, but for which you never seem to have the time. Reworking your business plan, creating a marketing strategy, evaluating employee performance, visioning - any number of things can be the focus of your retreat. You'll be amazed at what you can accomplish in a relatively short period of time when you take it away from the hustle and bustle of everyday business life. These are important things that need your attention, but day-to-day demands shout too loudly for you to take the time to look at them. Retreats give you new perspective, inspire extraordinary creativity, and let you look at aspects of your business you may not normally see. Remember too - all your retreat expenses are tax deductible!

### Decide how much time you really can take away

Plan your retreat during work hours - in other words, don't give up a weekend to do it. This is part of your business strategy. So, figure out how much time you can realistically give up. For the first time, you might decide on just a day trip, and as you get more comfortable with the idea, a few days or even a week might be appropriate. You need to be comfortable with this decision, because if you've planned for a 4-day retreat but really only feel comfortable with two - then two of your



retreat days will be wasted as you worry about what's going on at the office.

### **Find a quiet place where you can relax**

For a day trip, you may want to drive a few hours to get away to a nearby lake where you can relax on the shoreline (if it's a nice time of year), or hunker down in front of the fire in the lobby of a nice resort. If you're going away for more than a day, find an affordable lodge, bed & breakfast or hotel that will meet your needs. Some people have tried to retreat to the quiet of their home when everyone else is at work and school, and although it's better than nothing, you'll find too many things drawing your attention away from accomplishing your purpose. Getting away is always preferable, not to mention more fun!

### **Have an agenda**

Although part of the plan is taking some time to rest, relax and enjoy different scenery, your retreat should have a purpose. Plan how you will spend your time. What areas of your business life need attention? What issues are going on that you haven't had time to address? What would you love to accomplish but never have time for? Where do you want your business to go in the future, and what plans need to be made to get you there? You may want a loose agenda that allows you to flow through your time away with lots of flexibility. Or, you might be the kind of person who plans out their retreat very concretely, assigning times to each item on your agenda. Whatever your style, make your time away work for you. Also, make sure to plan some fun into your time. Include a round of golf, or a swim in the lake, a gourmet dinner, or a spa treatment. Your time away will be more productive if you allow for some relaxation amongst the planning and strategizing.

### **Keep a record**

Find a way to record the things you accomplish on your retreat. Take notes in a journal, record your ideas on a tape recorder, or take along a laptop and jot down your ideas and conclusions as you go. When you go back to the real world, you'll most likely forget the things you accomplished unless they are documented somewhere.

### **Set goals**

Once you've worked through your agenda, set some concrete goals relevant to what you've discovered on your retreat. Maybe you realized that your staff needs more development time - decide how you're going to implement that into your HR plan. Or perhaps you discovered that you haven't been doing enough long-range planning for your business. What will you do to rectify that for the future? Or maybe you came up with some dynamite marketing ideas. When will you incorporate them into a marketing strategy and implement them in your business? Putting legs to the ideas that came up during your retreat will be the difference between a nice time away, and a productive, dynamic outcome.

So, can you afford to take time away? Maybe a better question is - can you afford not to? What have you got to lose? Start with a day, and see what happens. I have a feeling you'll be planning your next retreat before too long!

[Top](#)

# **Six Steps to Effectively Delivering Criticism**

## **Taking the Sting Out of Saying What**

# Needs to Be Said

Last month we shared an article on how to accept and find value in criticism when it's leveled at you, but what do you do when the moment arrives and you have to deliver criticism to an employee, or someone you work closely with? Most people don't like giving criticism any more than they like receiving it, but sometimes, as a small business owner, it's necessary. When you're running a small business there is less room for poor performance - when someone is not functioning at peak capacity you feel it right away. That's why it's important to deal with it right away. The lost productivity is not worth the peace of mind you may gain by avoiding a difficult task. Here are six steps you can take to make an unpleasant job easier, and to create a more positive experience for your employee.

## 1. Be prepared

Before you actually talk to your employee, ask yourself why you feel the need to give the criticism. Check your motives carefully. Make sure that your reason is work-related, and that the criticism is necessary to change a particular behaviour that is affecting productivity, morale, customer service, etc. If you can't point to a specific behaviour and how it is negatively affecting your business, AND offer a concrete suggestion as to how it should be rectified, you might want to reconsider the situation. It can be helpful to write down a list of points you want to make; this will help you think logically through the issues and be better prepared for what the person might say in defense of your comments.

## 2. Be specific

When you are offering criticism, it needs to be very specific. You can't say "I've noticed your poor work habits lately", and expect the person to know what you're talking about. Address the issue head-on - "I've noticed the last two weeks you've been coming in 15 minutes late every morning." The more specific you are, the more likely the person will be able to acknowledge and address the behaviour.

## 3. Be kind

No one likes to receive criticism, and being considerate goes a long way to taking the sting out of it for your employee, as well as making them more receptive to receiving your comments and making positive changes. Remember that these kinds of situations are usually charged with a lot of emotion, and the person receiving the criticism will feel any one of a host of them - hurt, embarrassment, defensiveness, rejection, fear, self-doubt, or even hostility. If you're aware that those things will probably be present, and can give your criticism with kindness, you're more likely to minimize the negative impact of those emotions.



## 4. Be understanding

Don't assume you know the reason for the behaviour you're going to address. You might assume the employee's lateness is because she's disorganized and can't get her act together, but maybe the reality is her child-care provider is on holidays and she is finding it difficult to get to work on time from across town where her substitute is located. Once you've specifically named the behaviour, give your employee an opportunity to explain. Sometimes they'll acknowledge that there isn't a particular reason - but there may also be a good one they've simply been afraid to tell you about. If you are understanding, even if they can't give you a reason, you'll find your employee more receptive to your comments.

## 5. Be concrete

Don't offer criticism without a concrete way for your employees to fix what's wrong. "I'll give you some flexibility while your regular child-care provider is on holidays, but I do expect you to make up that time at the end of the day. You can either work until 5:15 or cut your lunch hours short until

you can get back to your regular work schedule." The more concrete you can be, the greater the chance that they will be motivated to put things right, and give you what you need.

## 6. Be accountable

Let your employees know that you are true to your word. If you've given that employee the flexibility to come in 15 minutes late as long as she makes up the time, don't give her dirty looks when she arrives for work. If you've promised an employee you will follow up with them regarding what you've talked about, make sure you do (setting deadlines when you talk with them can be very helpful to keep you both on track). Be a man or woman of your word. When employees know where they stand, and know you can be counted on to keep your word, they'll be more likely to follow through.

Giving criticism is never easy, but when it's motivated by improving something in the workplace, sometimes it's necessary. If you follow these steps you might find it just a bit easier to do that, and you'll find the outcome more positive.

[Top](#)

# Lightning Stress Relievers

## 20 Ways to Reduce Stress in 10 Minutes or Less

Whether your business is in a busy office downtown, or you're a one-man/woman show running a business from a home office, you'll experience stress from time to time. Demanding clients, employees who aren't performing up to par, complaining customers, meetings, deadlines, late suppliers, office equipment that breaks down when you need it most, crashing computers, delivery problems . . . the list goes on. Running a small business is stressful. So much is beyond your control, and when the buck stops with you there's no one else who can take the fall. In the middle of a busy, stressful day when your frustration mounts and you feel like you're going to explode (and you can't get away for a round of golf or an hour-long massage), here are twenty quick stress relievers that you can build into your normal routine and can do in ten minutes or less. Ten minutes of concentrated stress relief can make the difference between surviving your day, and heading for a cardiac arrest! So the next time you're stressed out, try a few of these ideas.

1. **Eat breakfast** - it's been proven that those who eat a good breakfast including whole grains and protein, get a stronger start to their day, have more energy and manage stress better.
2. **Breathe deeply** - take a few minutes to look away from your computer or that report you've been reading for 2 hours and look out the window. Force yourself to breathe deeply and slow your breathing down for five minutes.
3. **Take a mental vacation** - your brain needs a break. If you've been concentrating on something for a while, close your eyes, lean back and imagine your favorite vacation spot, or anticipate your upcoming vacation. Use your imagination to get right into the sights, sounds and smells of your vacation.
4. **Assign a number to your stresses** - if specific things are stressing you out, rate them from 1-10. If you can see how much stress a specific issue is causing, you might be able to put it at the top of your priority list, deal with it, and reduce that stress.
5. **Relax your body** - if you're the type of person who clenches their jaw, or grinds their teeth, or if your shoulders bunch up when you're stressed, become aware of your body, and deliberately relax those parts of your body that are tightening with the stress.
6. **Write it down** - a lot of people find journaling an excellent stress reliever. If a particular problem is stressing you out, take ten minutes to write it down, and then brainstorm a few ideas to solve the problem.
7. **Switch to decaf or herbal tea** - (this coming from a self-confessed coffee addict!) When stress levels are high, caffeine contributes to heightening your physical and emotional responses. If you know you've got a particularly stressful day ahead, order decaf in the morning, or make some herbal tea to calm you down in the afternoon.
8. **Take a stretch break** - you should do this several times a day. Just step away from your desk, reach up toward the



ceiling and hold a stretch. Move your body from side to side and hold your stretches for at least 20 seconds.

9. **Give yourself a treat** - I always have a stash of good chocolate on hand and when I'm stressed, I reach for a treat. The key is to give yourself time to enjoy it. Take ten minutes and savour the flavour. Order your favorite pastry or latte from a coffee shop, have a bowl of Smarties nearby. Be creative and treat yourself to something nice.
10. **Listen to music** - you don't even need to have a stereo at your office - just plug in to a radio station on your computer that plays your style of music. Close your eyes, sit back and just listen.
11. **Call a friend** - there's nothing like having a chat with a good friend. Even in the middle of a busy day you can take five or ten minutes to catch up with a friend. Make sure you pick a positive person who makes you laugh and feel good.
12. **Go for a walk** - around the block, in a park nearby, or even just around in your building if you can't get farther away. Moving your body and getting away from your desk for even a few minutes is enough to reduce your stress.
13. **Plan something fun** - we minimize stress when we have something to look forward to. If you've got a vacation coming up, spend a few minutes adding to your plans. If you don't, plan a fun outing for you and your spouse, or a few friends. Positive anticipation is a great stress reliever.
14. **Drink more water** - most of us go through our days dehydrated. When our bodies get the water they need, we function better, we get less headaches, digest our food better, don't overeat, and just feel better. Shoot for those 8-10 glasses per day.
15. **Take your lunch break away from your desk** - if you're the type who "works through lunch" everyday, you're adding to your stress level. You need a mental break from your work environment regularly to be more productive. Eat your lunch on a park bench or in the staff room rather than at your desk.
16. **Find a hobby you can do in 10 minute increments** - you can use that as a stress buster during the day. Crossword puzzles, a small jigsaw puzzle (if you have room in your office), photo albums, knitting - whatever interests you. Not only does this give you a mental break, but it also shifts your brain into a different gear, stretching different "brain muscles", which is always a good thing.
17. **Start a gratitude journal** - when you're feeling particularly stressed out, write down all the things you're grateful for that day. It helps to put things into perspective.
18. **Take a catnap** - many people really benefit from 10-15 minute power naps during the day. If you're one of those, close the door set a timer and snooze away.
19. **Listen to motivational tapes** - positive input equals positive output. It's simple and effective.
20. **Read something fun** - especially if your job requires a lot of technical reading. Have a funny book nearby (Dave Barry is my favorite), or escape for 10 minutes with a great novel or your favorite magazine.



No more excuses! Now you have twenty quick stress relievers that anyone can incorporate into their day. Relieve those stresses regularly and you'll find your work (and the rest of your life) much more enjoyable!

[Top](#)

## Outside-the-Box Interview Strategies

Not too many business owners I know enjoy hiring. Looking through mountains of resumes, spending hours reading and reviewing cover letters, setting aside days for the interview process, and after it's all said and done, taking a risk that the person you're making an offer to is the right

fit for your business. One of the key components to hiring the right person, is the interview. Many business owners have experienced interviewees giving pre-packaged answers to overused questions. Interviewees are trained in employment classes on how to answer predictable, basic interview questions, but do those questions provide you with the information you need to make a hiring decision? Sometimes, out-of-the-box interview strategies can really give you strong clues about the person sitting in front of you. The more creative you can be, the more you can stay away from routine questions, the more accurate your assessment will be; catching people just a little off guard can actually tell you a lot about them. If you're in a position to hire new staff in the near future, try some of these strategies and see if they work for you.

### **Tag-team interview**

Whenever possible, don't interview a candidate by yourself. Someone else always picks up on things you don't see while you're asking the questions. Being able to debrief with another person also helps you to determine whether your gut-feeling about this person is the same as theirs. It also allows you to observe while they ask questions. Try choosing someone who will be a peer of the person you're hiring, rather than another manager. You'd be amazed at the perspective you'll get from someone "in the trenches", about how another person will fit into that job position.

### **Stay away from routine questions**

If you're tired of asking "what are your strengths/weakness?" and hearing the same old answers, try asking more creative and insightful questions. Open-ended questions like "what would you do if . . ." or "how would you handle . . ." (creating a scenario that might happen in your business

environment) are a useful tool in seeing how someone might handle themselves in your workplace. Be careful not to be distracted by people who are articulate and can talk themselves (and you) into another unrelated corner. Make sure they've directly answered your question. Also, questions that pertain to their life goals are also helpful - "what do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?" Ask questions that may appear not to have anything to do with the job, but that will provide you with information about that person. For instance, "how would you describe your personality, and what kinds of people do you have the most trouble getting along with?", or "what is the worst possible job you could think of for yourself and why?" By asking these questions you're trying to get at the root of a person's nature to determine whether they would be a good fit. Disarming questions that avoid canned responses will get you those answers.



### **Let them talk**

Several months ago, I was interviewing for a job that I felt really suited my qualifications. I sat down at the table with two company representatives, prepared to answer the usual questions. Instead, they took about five minutes to tell me about the company, described the job, and give me a list of daily tasks the successful candidate would be required to do. Then, they said "OK, now tell us about yourself and why you think you would be a good fit for this position, and for this company." I was totally taken aback. I hadn't prepared for that. What it did was made me think on my feet. In a split second I had to recall the information they had just provided, and draw on everything on my resume and in my cover letter. In essence, I had to sell myself without the help of any prompting questions. What they saw when they asked that question of each candidate was how articulate they were, how well they were able to express themselves, how well they had listened to the information provided to them about the company, how well they knew themselves and how confidently they could present themselves. They also learned which candidates were able to think beyond the "job" and imagine their role within the company. They were able to determine which candidates could be put on the spot and not get flustered. That's a lot of information from one little question. Sometimes, less is more. The less you lead, the more you learn.

### **Use testing tools**

There are a lot of tools available online, and through HR companies that can assist in your assessment of a potential employee. Surveys, personality assessments, tests that ascertain what motivates people, tests that let you know how competitive, assertive, compliant, or bold your candidates are. These tests are very difficult for interviewees to manipulate, so the results you get provide a pretty accurate picture of who ends up sitting in front of you in the interview. Handwriting analysis is becoming an increasingly popular tool in the determination of organizational fit as well. I have a friend who is trained in this area and she works with employers to determine the personality traits of the applicants through hand-written cover letters. I am continually amazed by how accurate this science is. These kinds of tools can help you get a handle on the person even before you meet them, or may be a determining factor in whether you choose to interview them at all.

Hiring can be a draining, discouraging process, but if you use a few of these creative strategies, you might find yourself actually enjoying the interview process, and finding some great people along the way.

[Top](#)

# Problem-Solving Sales Techniques

## Five D's for Solving Your Customers' Problems and Closing the Sale

If you've been in sales for any length of time, you'll have had it happen to you. You can just feel the sale closing and your customer suddenly poses a problem that seems insurmountable. You feel as if you're back at the start and have to win them over again. If you're quick to see it, you can implement a strategy that will help you to intercept that problem and redirect it toward a solution quickly and effectively, and move towards that close you were anticipating moments before. The 5 D's for solving customer problems provide a quick and easy process that allows you to maintain control of the situation, ethically and effectively deal with the problem, and close the sale.

### **D**efine the problem

Listen carefully when your customer describes the problem. The more deeply you understand the question, the more quickly you'll be able to drive toward a solution. If you are unclear, ask questions to clarify. Then, when you think you understand, paraphrase what you believe the problem to be. "So Mr. Jones, what I'm hearing is that you are concerned about our service contract. You feel that there might be elements missing from the contract that may catch you unaware down the road, and for which you're afraid you might not be compensated. Have I got it right?" Defining the problem clearly and getting your customer to agree with your definition is crucial to being able to address the problem. This process not only gives you critical information, but also makes your customer feel heard, and thus valued. Always a step in the right direction!

### **D**etermine the assumptions

Once you've clarified the problem, ask yourself what assumptions are in the way of arriving at a solution, both on your part and the part of your customer. What are they assuming about you, your company or product that is instilling fear and mistrust? What experiences have they had in the past that may have led to these assumptions? What assumptions are you making about them? Are you assuming they have a lot (or a little) money? Are you assuming they'd really



rather go someplace else? Are you assuming they'll never be happy no matter what you do? Assumptions are powerful sales deterrents. Clear the decks when it comes to assumptions. Get rid of all yours, and deal only with facts. If you don't have all the facts you need to ask more questions. Make sure you get their assumptions on the table so you understand where they're coming from, and then deal with them.



## **D**Deal with the assumptions, and/or resulting objections

You've defined the problem, you've determined what the assumptions are, now it's time to get them out of the way. Systematically deal with the objections one by one. Let's say you've discovered that Mr. Jones's assumptions are as follows: He believes all car dealerships are crooked because he had a bad experience with one; he assumes that you're going to try to renege on some aspect of your service contract; he has determined that even though he likes you, he can't trust you. That's a lot of information - but now that you have it, you're in the driver's seat. Validate Mr. Jones's bad experience, and let him know that it's not reflective of the entire industry. Assure him that your service contract is solid. If there are any exclusions, mention them all. Let him know that other than those things - everything is covered. Tell him you understand it's hard to trust someone when you've had a bad experience, but that you will do everything in your power to earn his trust. You've dealt with every one of his assumptions, including your own integrity, so Mr. Jones will likely be listening now. Before you ever enter a sales situation make a list of every potential objection that could possibly be raised for not buying what you are selling, and then carefully consider what your response would be to each and every one. In this way you will be prepared for whatever is thrown at you, and rather than try to make an end run around the problem you will be able to say "I'm glad you brought that up Mr. Jones..." and answer the objection with confidence from a position of strength. The main thing about objections is that you need to learn to love them. As long as there is an unvoiced or hidden objection you will never get the sale. Encourage your customer to voice objections, even dig for them!

## **D**rive the process

Stay in the driver's seat. Don't allow Mr. Jones to veer off into uncharted territory as you deal with his objections. If he does, tell him you want to clear up the original issue first, and then you'll be happy to move on to his next objection. Keep asking questions, clarifying the problems, and dealing with the assumptions. This helps you and your customer to stay on track, and focus on what's at hand - the sales decision they are in the process of making.

## **D**eliver solutions

Now it's time to deliver solutions to those problems. This is a key to successful closing. Understanding is important, but it doesn't move the customer closer to the sale. "Mr. Jones, you have my personal guarantee that any work you need done on your vehicle, except for the 3 excluded items I mentioned, will be performed under the terms of this contract. If you have any hassles whatsoever from the service department on this, you can call me and I will deal with them directly. In fact, I'll even get our service manager over here to witness the contract, ensuring everything I have told you will be honoured. Would that suffice to address your concerns?" If you want to win the sale, you need to show you are capable of solving problems and providing solutions. The better you get at this, the higher your close rate will go. Being a solution-provider goes a long way towards establishing trust with a customer. Be careful however, only to promise things that are within your control to deliver, or the trust you have gained will be short-lived.

So, the next time you're feeling stalled in your sales process and your customers are voicing concerns - be thankful. It means you're getting closer to closing the sale! Become a 5-D problem solver, and you'll be on your way to a stronger sales quarter!

[Top](#)

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Published in cooperation with Your Corporate Writer - [www.ycw.ca](http://www.ycw.ca)