

## Make sure you don't pass stress on to employees

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NEW YORK -

Sales are down, customers are paying late and vendors are all raising their prices. That's a combination likely to raise stress levels for most small business owners - who in turn can pass on their anxiety and create a stressful atmosphere for employees.

Given the many problems in the economy that are affecting many small companies, it's probably impossible to avoid feeling uneasy about business. But an owner can take steps to be sure he or she isn't stressing out everyone else. Some go along with being a good manager and leader, such as being sure there's open communication between the boss and the staff. And some of it comes down to personal stress management - not letting the tensions of running a business in any kind of climate make life harder for everyone.

Being aware that you're stressed and that you could be affecting employees negatively is perhaps the most important thing you can do.

"If we allow ourselves to live the stress that we're constantly under, it's going to get transmitted - it's counterproductive and it's unpleasant," said Betsy Rich, president of Strategic Video & Blue Horse Digital, video production companies based in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

She recalled what it was like working for bosses who created stress: "My business partner and I worked in the most God-awful place for many many years and swore when we left there that we would never have that kind of environment in any place that we worked."

You don't have to be screaming for everyone to know you're anxious - your face, your body language or tone of voice can give you away. The fact is, most people don't know how they're coming across to others, so staffers may pick up on your bad mood even if you think you're hiding it.

So how do you know when you're stressing everyone out? If you're not in touch with how you react to stress, you might want to ask family members, friends, and yes, employees, about how you're doing. It helps if from your first day as an employer you've had open lines of communication with your staff. If employees have felt they could come to you with problems and that you'd be receptive to what they had to say, good or bad, chances are they'll be able to approach you when your stress is becoming contagious.

You should probably consider doing things that'll reduce stress. Take some time off if possible, get some exercise, make sure you get enough sleep, do things that make you feel good.

And not everything is worth stressing over. Melissa Anthony, who owns AnthonyBarnum, an Austin, Texas-based public relations firm, noted that a certain amount of stress is a part of running a business. "It's like household bills, but on a much bigger scale," she said, adding that the key is "knowing when something's really on fire or you're just imagining a situation."

Anthony believes that not passing on stress is part of being a good manager.

"The great leaders that I know, they made a choice ... they're going to address each problem" as it occurs she said. That way, the chance of a major crisis - and major stress - is lessened.

And, Rich noted, there are going to be those days that are just disasters, start to finish.

"It's something that we live with every day, and I also have MS (multiple sclerosis), and today I'm dealing with feeling exceedingly crappy and I dropped my phone in the toilet the day before yesterday - it was horrific," she said.

Some bosses believe that a stressful atmosphere will keep workers motivated. That may indeed work for some employees, but many if not most others don't do so well when there's high anxiety in the workplace. Productivity can suffer, they may call in sick with stress-related illnesses or just take mental health days to get away from the tension. The owner's greatest fear, that the work won't get done, actually ends up happening.

A good way to help manage everyone's stress levels is through ongoing open communication, which should include giving staffers updates on how the company is doing. Relaying this information will be more than a pressure valve - it will also help employees understand how they might help business improve.

Rich said her company has frequent meetings that the bosses strive to keep light, not angst-ridden, even as problems are dealt with.

Deborah Osgood, founder of BUZGate.org, a small business portal, said she has "daily check-ins" with her staff.

"I sit down with each of my reports every day and monitor the temperature," she said.

And, on Friday afternoons, the staff reviews what went well during the week. That way, they don't spend the weekend stewing, and they don't come back in a bundle of nerves come Monday morning.

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