

Entrepreneur®

VOLUME 19 NUMBER 3

MARCH 1991

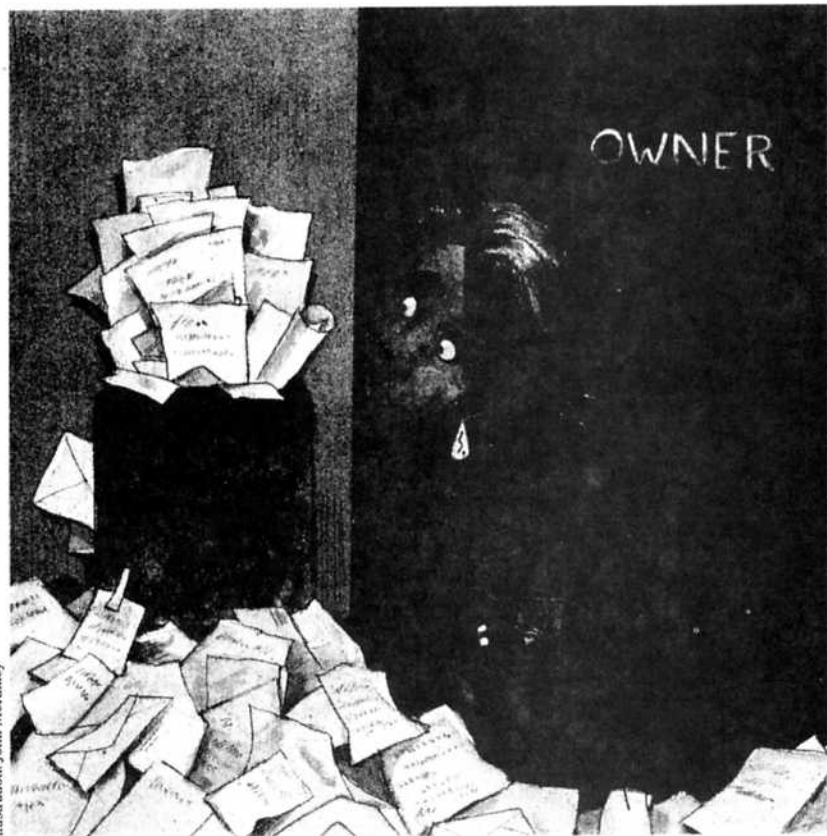


Illustration: John McKinley

Do you know what your employees are thinking? Find out what's on their minds by starting an employee response program. The results may surprise you.

SUGGESTIONS, ANYONE?

There's a note on your desk signed by several of your employees. Immediately, you expect the worst. You imagine they all want huge raises, a shortened workday, or something else especially difficult for the small-business owner to provide. What the note actually says is, "We hate the color of the paint in the washroom." You breathe a sigh of relief. Wouldn't it be nice if all your employees' complaints and suggestions were so basic and easy to handle?

They probably are, according to James Lukaszewski, chairman of White Plains, New York-based The Lukaszewski Group Inc., a corporate troubleshooting firm specializing in labor, environmental, and public policy issues. "Ninety percent of employees' concerns can be handled very quickly and with very little investment," says Lukaszewski. "All

business owners have to do is ask."

Actively soliciting employees' questions, suggestions, and ideas is vital to a smooth-running business. Your employees are your front line—they experience the operation of your business hourly and daily, and they are the best source of information and suggestions for improvement. Yet some business owners are reluctant to institute employee response programs, Lukaszewski says, because they're fearful of what employees might say. In his experience, Lukaszewski has found these fears to be unfounded: "No big secrets will be discovered or terrible things will happen [as a result of these programs]. In fact, if business owners provided employees a quick, confidential way to ask questions, they would find that what employees are thinking about are the very things that would help their businesses run better."

A firm commitment by the business owner and management team is

an essential first step in establishing an employee response program. This includes defining a specific period of time—Lukaszewski recommends three or four working days—as a turnaround time for questions or suggestions. Employees should have the assurance that if they ask a question, they will have a response, in writing, within this time frame.

Another important aspect of this type of program is the response form itself. Lukaszewski advises business owners to make the process as easy as possible. Forms should be brief, confidential and easy to get to the boss. Signatures should be optional, but Lukaszewski notes most employees, feeling their questions and insights are valid, want to sign their names. Lukaszewski also recommends, if company size and resources permit, publishing a newsletter containing both questions and answers, and adding a phone line specifically for trouble-shooting.

Answers to employees' questions should come from the highest possible source. In a small business, this may be the owner or president. For larger companies, it should be the highest senior manager possible. "This reassures your employees," Lukaszewski says. "They hear a lot of different things from a lot of different people. But if the president of the company says, 'You will have an answer to your question within 72 hours, with my signature on it,' that's pretty powerful."

If your company is experiencing tough times—downsizing or cutting back, for example—Lukaszewski recommends shortening the response time to 24 or 48 hours. This reduces employee uneasiness about the events taking place and builds employee confidence in the owner or management team's ability to steer the company back to success.

Employee response programs reward everyone involved. Employees are able to make their questions and suggestions known, receive thoughtful answers and know they are having an impact on management decisions. Business owners reap the benefits of both employee insights and the happier, more productive workers this program helps create. ■