

Glows and Grows

Providing employees with feedback—both positive and not—is a surefire way to keep everyone on the right track.

BY CLAIRE LUI

One of the hardest skills for a business owner to master is managing a group of employees. For some yarn shops, the question may be moot: The store may have only one or two employees, or even none, with the owner doing all of the work. But as a business starts to expand, hiring staff will be a given. What's the best way to ensure new employees understand and adapt to the company's culture?

Begin as You Mean to Go On

Be up-front from the get-go about your expectations. As the owner, of course, you know what kind of yarn store you wanted to create, but don't assume your employees can read your mind.

Many yarn stores have a formal employee handbook and orientation to help new employees get with the program. Ailene Long, assistant general manager at Jimmy Beans Wool in Reno, Nevada, describes their handbook as a "living document" that changes as the store grows, but says "the mission statement of the company never changes. We don't necessarily want to be the biggest yarn store, but we do want to be among the best by providing good customer service and creating lasting relationships."

Meet Regularly

As a business evolves, it is important to check in with employees to make sure they understand your expectations. Sheri Berger, owner of The Loopy Ewe in Fort Collins, Colorado, says, "I do a formal check-in after an employee has been with us for a month or so, and then as needed for part-timers. We review full-timers more regularly." Berger also holds quarterly staff meetings with customer service training, as well as informal weekly meetings to discuss new inventory or programs.

Ailene Long also emphasizes a check-in with new employees: "These employees are evaluated for both performance and fit within our company culture. We've learned the hard way that as much as we would like to keep everybody who is nice or works well, the team dynamic is very important."

Always Be Giving Feedback

It is a truth universally acknowledged that everyone loves sharing positive feedback but dislikes having to give negative feedback. But for yarn

stores with a significant number of employees, evaluations with "glows and grows" are unavoidable for a smoothly running operation.

"The human aspect of hurting somebody will always be hard for me, and negative feedback always has that potential," says Long. "I once had to write up an employee—an efficient hard worker with a positive attitude—for lack of follow-through, after a customer order snafu. This write-up was given after multiple warnings that follow-through is key." Long says that even though the employee was considered a valued team member, a formal

Ailene Long points out that evaluations go both ways, saying the process "gives our employees an avenue to also give us feedback that is recorded and taken very seriously."

Draw the Line Between Friend and Boss

Long worked her way up at Jimmy Beans, from a college kid working part-time to her current role as a full-time manager. "A lot of friendships have been formed during my time here, and I sometimes find it very hard to draw the line between

Feedback Fundamentals

- **Be clear and consistent about expectations. Create an employee handbook and have regular meetings to lay out company culture and expectations.**
- **Feedback is a two-way street: Give employees a chance to ask questions and to offer suggestions on a regular basis, both informally and formally. Make sure that employees also understand their rights and importance as part of the company.**
- **Keep written records: Whether it's a casual update about a change in customer service or a more formal evaluation, make sure employees initial or sign off on written updates as an acknowledgment of receipt. Follow up conversations with a quick email so that there is a record of the change.**
- **Emphasize the positives to all and the negatives to individuals. Consistently call out great employee work as frequently and publicly as possible. Whether it's a shout-out during a company meeting or posting a complimentary customer email on the bulletin board, creating a culture of positive validation benefits every employee. On the other hand, if an employee has to be given negative feedback, keep it private. If it's a larger issue that is worth mentioning to the store at large, keep the situation as anonymous as possible.**

negative consequence was necessary, saying, "I had to push through [my discomfort] in order to emphasize that certain behaviors needed to be adjusted, and it wouldn't be fair to everybody else if the problem wasn't addressed."

Sheri Berger agrees that giving negative feedback, though difficult, is actually beneficial to both employer and employee, as it helps the employee become more successful at his or her job. Berger adds, "It's also easier to give negative feedback when you have been able to give them plenty of positive feedback over time."

Berger does a formal yearly evaluation, both written and oral, for her full-time employees. They are asked to sign and date the evaluation. Jimmy Beans Wool also gives formal yearly evaluations.

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For Berger, the hierarchy is a bit different, since she is the owner and founder of the company. "Once in a while, someone will get frustrated or offended over something another employee did, said, didn't do or didn't say," says Berger. "When they can't work the problem out themselves, they bring it to me." But she has found that over time, her role as arbiter in these disagreements has become less frequent. "Because we've done training on different personalities and different perspectives, our employees are able to figure out these things on their own and be more patient with the differences."

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