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SMART LEADERS

Why listening is
Marcie Zlotnik's
most important job
at StarTex Power

TIPS FROM THE TOP

Michael Feuer:
Sometimes it's not
what you say but
how you say it

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Talk ain't cheap

HOW TO MAINTAIN A HEALTHY DIALOGUE WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES

Interviewed by CAROLYN LAWELL

Marcie Zlotnik co-founded StarTex Power in 2004, so she knows the company well, and stepping aside to give her growing employee base a say has been a struggle.

"It's a lot easier for me to go up to them and say, 'Well, why don't we do this?'" Zlotnik says. "That's not how you build a company."

As the electricity provider that she founded with her husband, Robert, has grown to 82 employees and revenue of \$136.7 million in fiscal 2008, Zlotnik has improved the company culture and delegated responsibilities simply by asking employees



more questions. To empower employees, StarTex had a feedback program called Block and Tackle, in which employees could recommend ideas to save time and make money.

Zlotnik says empowerment starts with encouraging discussion, listening to employees' ideas and making sure they understand what it is you're trying to communicate. And that, she says, can be as simple as asking them, "Hey, what should we do this month?"

Smart Business spoke with Zlotnik about how to empower employees through conversation.

Encourage discussion. You have to listen and promote discussion and encourage dialogue to empower employees. You've got to listen to what they're saying. If your answer is always no, you'll never get any ideas brought to you or any suggestions.

I have a rule with people. Just because I said no to you the first time, if you really believe strongly in something, go back, regroup your thoughts, put something else together and bring it back to me.

Don't come back to me with exactly the same thing, but if you think you could have presented it differently, then try again.

Be visible. Make yourself available. I don't think it is at your desk. Who is going to walk into the chairman's office and say, 'Hey, I want to talk.' It's not going to happen.

But we've had bowling alley parties, we've had putt-putt tournaments. That's where you develop the rapport with employees.

My office is right in the middle of the office, and I make sure whenever I leave the office, I go one way and I come back the other way so I have an opportunity to walk by everybody's office and desk, and I try very hard to stop and say something to someone.

It's amazing what they'll tell you in their environment, not yours.

Meet them on their level in an environment that they're comfortable in, which is at their desk. Any time I say to someone, 'Can you come into my office?' the red flags go up. That is never a good sign, even though many times it is.

Talk to somebody. Talk to them when you see them walking down the hall.

I want to go up and ask them something that is poignant to what they're doing. For example, customer service: 'What have you seen today in calls?' It's personal. It's not just, 'Have a great day.'

Know what your employees do to help you better understand what they're saying. You listen by understanding what they do. I believe that aside from a couple of the jobs in the office — I can't program a computer — I could do most of the jobs at the company, and people understand that, so they're comfortable talking to me about a problem.

You have to really know your business to be able to listen to criticism about the business because you realize

Make sure employees understand what you're trying to communicate.

You ask them — instead of saying, 'So what did you think?' because the answer is, 'Oh yeah, I agree with you,' — 'Before you walk away, Suzie, what is your gut feeling? How do you think you're going to implement this?' Or you ask such open-ended questions as, 'How would you apply what I just said?'

You can't leave having done all the talking. You can learn Excel, but until you really do some Excel worksheets, you really can't learn it. You can read all you want in the books, but you've got to go through two or three days of doing it to really learn it.

So if I'm doing and explaining how better to deal with customers, well, that's great, but let's put it in

"You have to listen and promote discussion and encourage dialogue to empower employees."

then it's constructive, not destructive.

Go and actually perform those jobs for a day and sit. For example, if you were to be at my office, most employees ... have to sit in customer service for at least a day and listen.

They don't have to answer the calls, but they have to sit and listen all day to what the customers think before they go into their job.

We've brought on two new senior VPs, and that's where they start. The successful senior VPs have been the ones who have literally said, 'OK, that's great, but how did you get this? Where did you come up with this?' Not, 'OK, this looks like it reconciles.'

place, let's have a role-playing between two employees.

We do a lot of training: 'Hey everybody, come in, and in a particular area, let's go through this example live. How would you do this? What do you think went wrong here?' [That's] rather than an e-mail: 'Dear so and so, next time you need to do this.'

I like most learning environments to be question and answer, and I like for me to do most of the question asking. 'Well, how would you handle that situation? What do you think could have been done differently?'

I think all of us have that school mentality of there's only so much you can listen to; you've got to be able to do something creative with it. <<