

By Julie Sturgeon

## Creating Superheroes

Empowering your employees takes time, training and trust.

IT'S HARDLY A MYSTERY WHY PETER GRAZIER BECAME excited over finding two extra (free!) chocolate-chip cookies in his bag after returning from the gourmet section of a grocery store located more than 30 minutes away from his house. He knew right then that the clerk who had helped him had taken a personal responsibility to see that Grazier was satisfied—and more—with his shopping experience. It's the kind of thing Grazier looks for, since he makes his living as a customer service consultant.

Still, Grazier, president of Teambuilding in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, understands how frightening it can be for business owners to hand over to their employees the power to make bottom-line decisions, both for the customer and for the business. Still, those who overcome that fear can reap substantial rewards. Take as an example Margaret Lora, spa director at Ajune, a medical spa in Manhattan, New York, who allows her estheticians to have a say in selecting the spa's new products and equipment. For services, estheticians have access to as many as 10 product lines from which to choose for individual treatments. Lora sets the protocol for each treatment, but estheticians are given the freedom to

interpret the spa's vision of the service. "They make decisions that lead to amazing results," she says. "I feel that kind of empowerment is vital to a low turnover rate and, of course, a successful business."

Surveys and statistics agree. According to Whitney Walpole, president of Culture Counts, a management consultancy in Denver, the public demands three things from businesses before they head home happy:

- To speak with someone knowledgeable about the business.
- To work with someone who has the authority to take action.
- To be heard and appreciated.

Not surprisingly, the same empowerment to make decisions that appeases clients also appeases employees: Staff members who must seek permission to address customers' needs become frustrated themselves, shutting off their ability to listen. The last thing your spa needs in a competitive marketplace is to encourage employees to become paid robots who say the right words, but whose body language tells a different story.

"It's especially important to empower employees in a day spa, where how your guests feel about their experience is the essence of your business relationship," says Barry Himmel, senior vice president of Signature Worldwide, a Dublin, Ohio-based company that specializes in tailored training for the spa industry. "If employees don't have empowerment or aren't sure what they can do on their own to create the right experience for clients, your spa certainly isn't customer friendly."

### Culture Concerns

"Empowerment isn't a program to simply be started at a business," says Grazier. "It's a philosophy—a way of trusting that people want to give their very best performance." But before you can build this atmosphere



## MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

of mutual trust, you must draw a clear vision of the empowerment culture you intend to build, in enough detail that it makes sense to every employee, from your star esthetician to the high school student who comes in to help restock inventory. “Everyone is connected to the customer—if an employee’s job isn’t to help the customer, then it’s to help someone who helps the customer,” says Grazier. “An empowerment culture has to truly impact everyone.”

John Stefanick, promotional manager for Noëlle Spa for Beauty & Wellness in Stamford, Connecticut, insists on communicating the spa’s cultural values at every weekly meeting and through email messages to employees. The goal is to ensure that everyone on staff knows the specifics of the spa’s philosophy and where the company is headed so that on-the-spot decisions made by empowered employees naturally mesh with the business’s goals. “When you empower someone, you’re showing you believe in their ability to help you get to the goal



you’ve laid out for your business,” he says.

Don’t overlook the training employees will need to interpret your philosophy correctly. Walpole encourages business owners to schedule lunches with employees to go over, in informal terms, how the spa makes money. Himmel calls this the “buy-in stage,” where employees are shown why their skills are important to clients and, ultimately, their own future in the spa industry.

Once employees understand the business realities of the spa, the next step is skill development, honing the instincts employees need to consistently exceed the ever-changing expectations of spa clients. Create a practice stage, where employees take turns acting out scenarios of happy and dissatisfied

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client situations. At the end of each meeting during this stage, Grazier asks employees to bring three possible solutions to a specific customer service dilemma to the next meeting.

“Everyone is empowered to do something at the spa, even if that’s just answering the phone,” says Himmel. “The hope is that they have a base level of customer service standards that can be built upon. What you’re really trying to do with empowerment is to get employees to feel comfortable going beyond that base level.”

Done correctly, empowerment requires a commitment to ongoing mentoring and coaching on the part of the spa owner, and a willingness to look out for other staff members on the part of employees. A truly empowered day spa is one where employees feel enough responsibility to take action when a situation arises. Incidences of treating a customer poorly or refusing a simple request should be noted by the rest of the staff, and the situation addressed, in keeping with the

## Questions of Empowerment

Are your employees empowered? Answer these questions to find out:

- **Are tasks completed on time?** If not, that’s an early sign that employees aren’t taking ownership of their positions.
- **Does your staff bring you active solutions, or just problems?** If employees are in the habit of “dumping and running” when it comes to problems, you may have signaled your discomfort with their decision-making abilities.
- **Do your employees sometimes make mistakes?** Employees who are scared to make decisions for fear of consequences from you won’t take the risk of trying new solutions to problems.

spirit of high standards and professional reputation.

You may want to bring in an outside consultant to help get you started in the right direction toward better employee empowerment. “As an outsider, a trainer often has more credibility with skeptical employees,” says Himmel. Consultants can also help get beyond operational details that can bog down empowerment discussions. For example, if your spa has parking problems, discussion of the minutiae

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of where clients can park may bog down a greater discussion of how to ensure that clients know of parking problems before they arrive and how to assist them once they arrive.

#### **Balance of Power**

There's one caveat to employee empowerment: Once you grant someone permission to make his or her own informed decisions, you *must*

back those decisions. Contradicting employee decisions too often won't do much for their confidence and will change their behavior in similar future situations, making them more timid and unwilling to take a chance.

Beware of the pitfall of allowing employees to go too far in their empowerment, however. Those who are passionate about their work risk going well beyond their normal duties, cautions Stefanick. "As an owner, it's terribly important to recognize what an employee does well, and then let him or her be responsible for decisions within that area. But we sometimes allow employees to create a different position for themselves than what we had in mind, and that can keep the spa from running smoothly in the long run." In other words, make sure you're steering the business instead of your empowered employees.

To keep employees from going too far, you can set boundaries. One of the most common boundaries is a dollar-amount limit. Employees may make individual decisions until those decisions exceed a preset cost limit; after that, the decision reverts to the manager or owner. Himmel has seen some spas place boundaries based on customer type: Management decides how to deal with new client issues, while employees are free to make decisions for repeat clients.

"Once you've coached employees on any boundaries you've set in place and seen them handle a few situations, that mutual trust will develop," he says. "It's a partnership, and giving staff the skills they need and then trusting them to make the right decisions for your customers and your business is the key to success." ●

**Julie Sturgeon** is a Greenwood, IN-based freelance writer. She can be reached at [ceoeditor.com](mailto:ceoeditor.com).