CAST POLYMER
CONNECTION
Fall 2022

The strong team at Custom Marble Solutions

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

- The problem of micromanagement
- Human connections keep people happy
- Why firing is so tough

TEAR-OUT MEMBER DIRECTORY

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

DEPARTMENTS

ON THE COVER:
One of the first challenges Brad Crutchleo faced when he started Custom Marble Solutions was putting together the strong team he needed. With help from vendors and referrals, he has built a staff that focuses its efforts on being able to deliver quality at quicker project delivery times. Brad is pictured here (left) with Zach Goeke, CMS production manager, who handles most of what goes on daily on the plant's manufacturing line. Story on page 4.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

It's all about connections

This issue of the magazine focuses on people and connections. As your new leader, the issue of connections is foremost in my thoughts. My main goal as the new president is to see the association grow both in numbers and in collaboration. To accomplish that requires finding ways to build a strong network based on our solid history.

We have been fortunate in this industry to have had great leadership both from our executive committee and our board. We have some top-notch initiatives started that are progressing rapidly and smoothly so it's exciting to be at the helm to see them grow and to identify additional goals. I know I have a tough act to follow, but it's a challenge I relish.

One of the strengths this association has is our strong connections—member to member, company to company, friend to friend. Think what we can accomplish if we're all rowing in the same direction!

> ONE OF THE STRENGTHS THIS ASSOCIATION HAS IS OUR STRONG CONNECTIONS... THINK WHAT WE CAN ACCOMPLISH IF WE'RE ALL ROWING IN THE SAME DIRECTION!

What you'll read in this issue are stories about the connections within our own companies. The themes for the issue are business trends and human resources, which blend into each other today. We all recognize that a main business concern is finding the right people for our teams and then coming up with ways to keep them happy. We know that to survive in the current competitive human resources world, we must invest in tools to attract, hire and retain skilled individuals. We also are learning how changing cultural values are affecting who is attracted to our ranks. For example, the younger generations we hope to hire don't see their jobs just in terms of wages—they want to feel fulfilled by what they do, and they want to be appreciated for what they contribute.

Lisa Ryan, our keynote at POLYCON this year, calls what's needed "Grategy" (a strategy involving finding ways to show gratitude), and we will hear from her in the Winter issue of the magazine, which covers the conference. In this issue, we address 1) how to encourage the human connections that keep people in their jobs, 2) how to let go of the inclination to micromanage and 3) how to get over roadblocks such as letting go of staff who are getting in the way of other employees' happiness on the job.

The magazine profiles newer member Custom Marble Solutions, a shop in Dayton, OH that sprang from a need recognized by several individuals to have a manufacturer that could deliver both quality and timely delivery of products. The company is run by Brad Crutchleo, who came to the industry through the ranks of sales and running a manufacturing operation, and who put together a top-notch team from scratch to start the company in 2017.

We also have the first-ever printed membership directory, which we hope you'll all pull out and save so that you can make the vital connections you need to succeed.

Please feel free to send me suggestions on how to connect. You can reach me at kklodt@towersurfaces.com. ■

Kerry Klodt
ICPA President
General Manager, Tower Industries

PROFILE

Custom Marble Solutions: *Building on solid ground*

BY GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE

COMPANIES IN THE CULTURED MARBLE BUSINESS HAVE THEIR BASES ROOTED IN A MYRIAD OF BEGINNINGS: from passing down a business generation to generation to giant corporations that wanted a kitchen and bath arm to ma and pa shops run out of someone's garage. One of the common elements found in those who are successful is a focus on recognizing a need and fulfilling it in the most efficient manner, which bodes well for one of ICPA's newer members: Custom Marble Solutions, Dayton, OH (CMS).

CMS creates and designs cultured marble surfaces for residential markets, marketing them to other contractors such as plumbing supply houses, design centers and builders. One of its biggest customers is Korrect Plumbing, Heating & Air Conditioning in Dayton, a 70-year-old company founded by the Patterson family. Korrect and CMS now have common ownership, though the two companies are operated as separate entities.

CMS was born in the brain of Korrect's president Nate Patterson and fulfilled through the skills of Brad Crutchleo, CMS' general manager, who learned the business of marble making from the ground up but who had an extensive background in the manufacturing field when the two began discussing a new company in 2017.

"When Nate and I started talking about the possibilities I had no idea what composite marble was," Crutchleo explains. "I worked as a sales manager in the automotive industry with an active role in the manufacturing part of that business," he says.

Now, five years later, he's head of a company that employs eight full-time production staff and a delivery person. That company now has more work than anyone envisioned, but the entire staff focuses on one main principle: delivering quality service and value in a timely manner.

"In our area of the country, we are hearing of lead times of 16 weeks for many projects. At CMS, we are right at about three or four weeks," he adds.

Why CMS?

Crutchleo credits the successful startup to several factors, beginning with recognizing the need.

"Nate and I went out to dinner one night and he said, 'I think I want to start a cultured marble business and I want you to run it.' Korrect does many bathroom remodels and was using another supplier. But lead times had become a real problem and getting quality work was a challenge," Crutchleo explains.

By the time of that conversation, the two had become good friends and Nate knew of Brad's background in sales and manufacturing.

They met through their children, who are Go-Kart enthusiasts. "At first, Nate was not too fond of me," he says with a laugh. "But that all changed as we got to know each other. We ended up traveling to races throughout the Midwest and there were times when one of us couldn't attend the race and the other would look after both boys." This was the beginning of a long relationship of trust, he adds.

Crutchleo also credits what he learned at his former employer Dayton Wheel Concepts with helping him start CMS.

"At Dayton Wheel, we had a great production manager, and he and I had a good working relationship. Between the owners of Dayton, the general manager, the production manager and I, we developed new processes, new distribution avenues, new raw material sourcing and other processes that gave that company a new life," Crutchleo says.

His background enabled him to start with good practices at CMS and move on to knowledge of the actual product.

"In the beginning, it didn't have as much to do with what we were making as putting together a framework for a good manufacturing company. Communicating with the suppliers to our industry helped me find our first employee. We then hired skilled people who could guide the company in buying the right equipment, putting the right processes in place, and then finding a solid production team," Crutchleo says.

"We…hired skilled people who could guide the company in buying the right equipment, putting the right processes in place, and then finding a solid production team."

Along the way, he learned what the strengths of the products were.

"Cast polymer not only looks good, but performs beautifully, making it an easy sell. At this point, I know way more about the industry and product than I ever thought I would."

At the same time, "I know I still have a lot to learn, but I have made many friends, and I have a great network of people that help me regularly. I'm very happy to be a part of this industry and CMS," he says.

The business started in a rental plant in Cincinnati, where Crutchleo resided. It has since moved to the Dayton suburb of Trotwood on the same site as Korrect Plumbing.

"Our long-term plan was always to be close to Korrect. We had the space to build a new facility there so about 18 months after initial production, we began building our current 10,000-square-foot plant," Crutchleo says.

The company moved into the new building in October 2020 "and we are already in need of an addition," he adds.

Today's business

Although CMS products are found in Korrect's showroom (as well as a few other local showrooms), the company markets mainly by word of mouth and outside sales visits by Crutchleo and a sales representative.

CMS is regional in scope, serving Dayton, Cincinnati and eastern Indiana with some interest beginning in the Columbus area.

Crutchleo says the most popular products are shower systems that include a base, walls, trim and accessories. The company also offers custom shower niche options as well as benches, shelving and more.

Customization comes from small molds and the installation process, and an increasingly sought-after option today is a unique subway tile pattern.

"As far as color goes, we offer mostly grey and white, which have become very popular. We have white on white, antique white, sterling grays and sterling grays on white. Neutral colors are what seems to sell the best these days," he says.

The production is mostly the traditional processes of mixing buckets and pouring by hand, but Crutchleo says, "we are looking into new processes as well as newer products. We hope to acquire more knowledge at POLYCON and future meetings."

Production Manager Zach Goeke pours a product.

On the polishing line are employees Tony Satorio (left picture) and Travis Clark (right picture).

Crutchleo says the company's strength is its employees and the team they've formed. "We have the best team in the area, and I believe, in the industry. Our ability to communicate with each other and provide the best products and customer service gives us a huge advantage. Our people care and understand we are here to serve the customer and this keeps us on track," he says.

He admits that one of the biggest challenges for any company in the cultured marble business is finding and keeping those highly skilled people motivated and happy. The key to doing that is to include them in creating solutions, he says.

"We do our best to offer employees the chance to give their input. Treating them with respect goes a long way. But we also know we couldn't do this without those employees so we do our best to reward them however we can (bonuses, salaries, flexibility)," he says.

As far as finding the right hires, CMS relies heavily on referrals, using its extensive ties with Korrect as a good source for some of those referrals.

"We believe in people knowing people. We take the referrals from anyone we know and trust to have good judgment, no matter what they do at work. I can't stress enough how important it is in the manufacturing world to listen to your people and treat them with respect and grace," he says.

(From left): Tony Satorio and Nick Nickell prepare a piece for shipping.

He also refers to today's supply issues as one of the biggest challenges today. CMS meets that challenge "by being as transparent with our customers as we can and by absorbing what we can. When we have to pass along the increases in price, for example, we try to be as fair as possible," he says.

Crutchleo says he hopes to gain the knowledge to handle those challenges and others through his ICPA membership.

"We joined the association mostly for the network of people it offers. I was at spring's The Buzz in Atlanta and am attending POLYCON. These meetings are invaluable to our industry, and we appreciate all ICPA does for our industry."

He also stresses that, "I have personally made good friends as a result of my membership, and as a bonus, I know I can call them when I need help with issues." ■

GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection.** She encourages readers to send her ideas on companies to profile in the magazine. Reach her at gsparente@verizon.net.


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MICROMANAGING: Is it a problem?

BY GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE

GO TO ANY INDUSTRY EVENT TODAY AND CHANCES ARE, YOU'LL HEAR A DISCUSSION about what most business leaders consider a main challenge: how to keep employees motivated and engaged.

While the conversation usually involves an exchange of ideas on salary, benefits, appreciation rewards and other specifics, one issue that doesn't come up is this: are my employees unhappy because of micromanaging?

Many owners of small businesses have been involved in their industry for a long time, and some have been managing their operations the same way for many years. The leaders of these companies are experts used to putting in way too many hours fighting hard to keep their companies afloat through good times and bad. It's often said they *are* the business.

But growth and longevity challenges can arise within companies viewed as the individual in charge instead of an entire organization. Also, the employer/employee relationship in all industries is evolving, as is the way business owners need to manage and delegate and what employees today expect to get from working. One of the main requirements cited by most generations of workers in the current working atmosphere is this: I want responsibility and I want respect from my manager.

It may be the right time for some companies to ask themselves if their current corporate environment promotes over-managing. If the answer is yes, read on.

Why it matters

According to the Work Institute, replacing a worker today costs as much as 33% of that worker's annual wages and that's a conservative estimate (see Jen Nash's story on page 18 for figures from Gallup). That means that if you take an employee whose compensation adds up to $45,000 per year, turnover is costing the company at least $15,000.

At the same time, research shows that business owners who find ways to make their employees feel valued benefit financially. Gallup research from several years ago shows that leaders who excel in delegating generate about 33% higher revenue for their companies.

Yet too few leaders know how to properly motivate today's employees to want to come to work, as evidenced by more statistics. Another recent Gallup study reported that, despite 50 years of research by Gallup showing better business outcomes for employees who are "engaged," a low percentage of companies are succeeding. [Gallup's definition of engaged workers are those that are "highly involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace."]

According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2022 Report, 60% of all people around the world are emotionally detached at work and 19% are miserable. In the U.S., about 33% of employees are engaged, which is the highest rate in the world. But that means two-thirds of U.S. workers don't feel what they do at work is appreciated; these workers don't feel they share with their leaders a stake in the company's long-term success. If industry hopes to find ways to retain people, it needs to start by making them feel valued.

Micromanaging discourages the distribution of industry knowledge. Leaders who insist on doing everything themselves are often missing the best opportunity to pass along acquired industry-specific skills to their staff at great detriment to the long-term survival of a business. Yet delegation of industry knowledge is key to the survival of almost every business.

Micromanaging also encourages dependency. Staff members being told exactly what to do each time will find it much more difficult to think for themselves, thus creating a dependency on managers to support their tasks to the detriment of the managers' time and workload.

What is micromanagement?

Different business management gurus define micromanaging in different ways, and some make it clear that not all of it is negative.

The general definition, according to Merriam-Webster is "to manage, especially with excessive control or attention to details." The word "excessive" is key in that definition. Excessive occurs when an owner or manager spends too much time involved with routine activities when they should be focused more on long-term strategy. Over-managing can reduce employee skills, productivity and performance, and create an irrational dependency on management for even the smallest tasks.

At the same time, the pariah of being a micromanager drives some leaders to avoid interactions necessary to move the company and employees in a positive direction. In "The Ultimate Guide to Micromanagers: Signs, Causes, Solutions," Workplace magazine points out that, while "The micromanager has become a bit of a boogey man in the business world," avoidance of being labeled with that term is also a problem in today's workplace. The magazine points back to a 2020 Gallup survey that showed a severe lack of feedback in some businesses: 47% of employees in that survey reported feedback from their managers, "a few times a year" or less and almost 20% got feedback only once a year or less.

The job-finding site Indeed recently posted on its website that hands-on managers can have positive characteristics, as well as negative ones. The positives include:

- Being highly involved and engaged
- Finding ways to influence business-critical tasks
- Aiming to get the best out of their teams
- Adding value to a department
- Knowing to whom they should delegate
- Developing empathy naturally

The danger is in the mix and the extent of managing as it steps from enthusiasm to becoming "micro."

How to know when micromanaging is occurring

There are many books and articles written about how to recognize the signs of micromanaging. The business world has been talking about this issue for more than half a century. Inc. magazine says one of the first references to the problem was in 1960, when famed MIT Sloan professor Douglas McGregor wrote a management treatise of the two types of leadership styles: Theory X, which said the best work is done through constant prodding (because humans are lazy and unmotivated by nature) and Theory Y, which claimed workers are inherently self-directed.

According to McGregor, "The motivation, the potential for development, the capacity for assuming responsibility, the readiness to direct behavior toward organizational goals are all present in people. ... It is the responsibility of management to make it possible for people to recognize and develop these human characteristics for themselves."

"The micromanager has become a bit of a boogey man in the business world."

McGregor's treatise essentially whittled the issue of over-managing down to the basics of belief on the part of owners or managers about the human nature of the workforce. But the business world has since identified the reality that there are many reasons managers of workers tend to get too involved in the everyday details. A few of the most-oft cited ones include:

Focusing on criticism for what people do wrong rather than what they do right. It's much easier to pinpoint mistakes than spend time building up an individual's job-related skills and self-confidence. However, leaders who recognize the need to keep skills within the company should find ways to identify who excels at which skills and then put that knowledge to use.

Letting time and project constraints run thought processes. In today's environment where most companies now have more work than they know what to do with, many managers can believe it's faster to do something themselves rather than take the time to coach, train or oversee someone else. The outcome is usually the same—a manager solves the current challenge, but the employee loses an opportunity to learn and improve his or her skills.

Thinking that experience outweighs every other aspect of the job. Many leaders who have been in the business for years believe in the "my way or the byway" philosophy. They are not open to learning about new methods of casting, sanding, cutting, polishing or running the business from an employee-based perspective because what was good enough for them during their years in the industry should be good enough for current employees. Employees bring a wealth of knowledge from their life skills, hobbies and education and can introduce unique ways of solving business challenges from different perspectives.

An inability to recognize when help is needed and how much should be given. Some managers have the best intentions of encouraging their staff in their daily accomplishments. But aligning the length and timing of help can be critical. Harvard Business Review (HBR) calls this the "rhythm of involvement." For example, when employees encounter hurdles that can't be overcome with fast solutions or a few hours of the boss's time, long sessions of help or education—sometimes week-long retreats or company-wide meetings—may be needed. However, often, all an employee needs to handle a problem is a little of what HBR calls "path clearing." That might be something such as solving a temporary shortage of staff (COVID ring any bells?), which might require a manager to just take over specific tasks and give the production team short-term relief until a longer-term solution is developed.

The fear that employees will reflect badly on their professional reputation. This might seem like a no-brainer: if an employee under performs, his or her manager is likely to be held accountable. However, it should not be a driving force in action. HBR reports that more than 5,000 leaders have taken the online "Are You Motivated By Power or Achievement?" test (The Leadership IQ website). Of those, about 41% of respondents had a "very strong desire for power." That isn't always a bad driving force—the desire to look strong—but it can get in the way if it's a part of everyday schedules.

An inability to communicate effectively. This is one of the biggest hurdles in putting good management systems in place, and many leaders of industry have had to learn how to weigh what employees really think and what motivates them. Good communication takes time and skill, and too many busy leaders let that reality get in the way of guiding their staff. However, people who cannot communicate cannot determine what's wrong or instruct employees on how to do it right.

How to safely "let go"

Letting go of the tendency towards micromanagement depends entirely on the type of person who's doing the managing. Some people are by nature detail-driven so it drives them crazy when staff doesn't get the specific nuances of what they've been told. Others are people who want to be liked by their staff—they don't want to step on any toes so they micromanage an individual to avoid having to face firing or demoting the person.

The basic issue to overcome is learning how to trust ... determining ways to trust employees enough to step back and let them do their jobs or better yet, do their jobs and then share their skills and knowledge with the rest of the staff.

Building that trust can be done in several ways including:

Establish an overall company culture that encourages people to treat each other with respect. That step starts with the leader who is doing the managing (hopefully, not at the micro level). Leaders who focus on creating a positive workforce culture in which people feel educated, responsible, supported and appreciated are creating a place where micromanaging by anyone isn't likely to thrive.

Practice delegating. For some people, the act of letting go doesn't come naturally. People who recognize they need to do so, however, can start small. They don't have to go into their offices and close the door. They can look for opportunities to give trusted employees tasks and responsibilities that won't be catastrophic to the business should something go awry. They can learn to recognize individuals' strengths and understand how to best manage those strengths within the context of the work environment for the long-term goal of the organization. The more comfortable a manager is with what employees are doing, the more tasks can be assigned.

Be open to communicating or tracking in new ways. Many of the companies **Cast Polymer Connection** has interviewed in recent years are learning the usefulness of regular staff

STORY CONTINUES ON PAGE 21

Why is micromanaging so bad?

Almost anyone can recall a time in their lives when they felt micromanaged—whether that time was an old job with a horrible boss or at home, where an "annoying" spouse insists on looking over the shoulder during an attempt to make his mothers' homemade spaghetti sauce.

But why is it bad to take such an active role in seeing things done "right"?

- **It annoys the person being micromanaged. While that may not seem an earth-shattering reality in the work world, it's hard for a person who's ticked to listen to what the boss says, much less learn.**
- **It focuses on minutiae instead of the big picture. When the boss is down on the line watching how each task is accomplished, he or she is not in the office, looking over spreadsheets or making vital customer calls.**
- **It leads to burnout. That doesn't mean just a stressed employee; it also means an overworked boss.**
- **It discourages innovation. Employees constantly over-bossed are not going to feel free to speak up when they see a way something can be done more efficiently.**


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THINKING OF TOMORROW

Tips on keeping employees happier

(Hint: It's about connections, not money)

BY JEN NASH

A WISE CEO I TALKED TO RECENTLY SHARED THIS THOUGHT: "GETTING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC WAS HARD. Everyone wanted change—Something to break up the monotony of doing the same thing, day in and day out. But realistically, most people don't want to divorce their partner. Moving to a new house is insanely expensive. Quitting is pretty much their only option right now... As a leader, this behavior is really hard on me personally and hard on my company."

As an executive coach and corporate trainer, I found this insight powerful and thought-provoking. It got me looking at what types of retention initiatives consistently worked to find ways to support my corporate clients more profoundly. The CEO who shared this thought has struggled with staff attrition rates between 15-20% over the past year and was eager to consider solutions, especially if those solutions were easy to implement and could create lasting change.[1]

Why this issue hurts so much

According to Gallup, the cost of replacing an individual employee can range from one-half to two times that employee's annual salary, which many say is a conservative estimate. That means that an organization employing 100 people where the average salary is $50,000 would have replacement costs of $660,000 to $2.6 million per year (using the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017 average turnover rate of 26.4%).

Even though most employees in manufacturing are paid hourly, not by salary, these figures show the extent of the financial expense. However beyond the finances is the emotional expense to consider because not only are other employees picking up the slack for those that leave, they're also sometimes bereft at being left behind. Some companies have looked at cost-saving measures and avoided replacing departing staff, but this only increases the stress and potential burnout suffered by the remaining teams. If management isn't careful, one staff member's departure can set off a catalyst of resignations, especially if individuals begin to feel like a bigger workload is being dumped on them.

Here are some practical ways to help with this problem.

Talking to employees

One suggestion I have shared with several firms is the idea of the stay interview. We've gotten used to hearing the term "exit interview," but I'm referring to an interview of people staying in the job. Some companies called this a "retention interview," which may be a better term since "stay interview" suggests the employee is thinking of leaving—we need all the positivity we can get.

These interviews make sense for a simple reason: why wait until people have given their two-week notice to discover why they're unhappy? Finding this out makes more sense to me than exit interviews because nine times out of ten, we don't do anything with the information gathered when someone is departing. Instead, why not develop a cadence of periodic one-on-one interviews that works for the organization? Such data allows managers to ask for honest feedback that can be reported to executives. What does such an interview look like? In my work with companies to structure these types of custom sessions, I've seen these typical questions:

- What do you like most and least about working here?
- What keeps you working here?
- If you could change something about your job, what would that be?
- What are the biggest reasons you'd consider going to work elsewhere?
- What are we doing well here in our company?
- What motivates or demotivates you?
- What can I do more or less of, as your manager, to help your situation?
- What might tempt you to leave this company?

Ending the retention conversation by reinforcing the positive things the manager has heard about the employee from other team members and supervisors wraps up the process on an appreciative note. However, it's vital to listen to what's said and implement changes as a result. No one likes to think they're talking to a wall, and employees who feel they are doing so are more likely to walk out the door.

Office friendships can make a big difference

Most people are amazed when I tell them that one of the easiest tools they can use to fight the resignation culture is to support office friendships. The facts speak for themselves: according to a survey by Globoforce done for Workplace magazine, 62% of people would reject another job offer if they had more than five friends at their current job, and that number rises to over 70% for those with more than six friends at work.[2]

"That warm, fuzzy feeling drops dramatically as the number of workplace friends declines—fewer than half of those with one to five friends at their company feel the love and just 24% with no workplace friends love where they work," Kathy Gurchiek says in an article for the Society for Human Resources Management about the importance of workplace friendships.[3]

So how can your company support workplace friendships?

From developing mentorship programs where senior staff foster relationships with more junior members to team-bonding activities, there are many ways to make connections stick beyond initial contact between two people. Mentoring programs also can be presented to employees as fostering integration at different corporate levels, and they are relatively simple to implement. For example, mentors and mentees might be encouraged to use monthly outings and be given a small budget for activities such as grabbing a bite to eat, shooting pool, playing mini golf…anything that encourages connection even when differences exist in ages and other areas.

Team bonding activities sound fluffy to many executives, something "nice to have" that isn't practical. But in many cases, they can be critical. The most successful organizations are made up of strong, high-performance departments and teams, and the way to build such teams is by ensuring individual employees are happy, engaged and doing work they find fulfilling. Research by Cigna shows that lonely employees have a higher risk of turnover, lower productivity, more missed days at work, and lower quality of work. (Meanwhile, employees who take a break every 90 minutes report a 50% higher level of health and well-being, a 50% greater capacity for creative thinking, and a 30% higher level of focus. The break room is a great place for social connections!).[4]

> **"Most people are amazed when I tell them that one of the easiest tools they can use to fight the resignation culture is to support office friendships."**

Many companies do a good job creating after-work socials or "invite your spouse" barbecues and similar events. But fostering friendships during the day is also a good tool. LaFleur, a marketing firm in Michigan, does this by having teams play a variety of games every Friday and encouraging fun attire for those occasions. On one such Friday, I found the employees, who were all working remotely, playing a fast 30-minute game of Code names online while wearing clothing inspired by their favorite TV show characters.

Because employees were scattered between a few different states, this type of engagement boosted the mood, supported laughter and bonding and gave everyone a minute to just have some fun with each other. I know some executives reading this are wondering: why would I pay employees to play? My answer is this: Fun is bonding, which supports better working relationships and builds friendships. As I mentioned, this boosts retention rates and lowers the cost of new employee engagement.

Games enhance connections

Some team-bonding activities are built to boost and enhance vital connectivity and socialization between team members and departments. For example, while it may sound a little silly, playing a game such as "Whose Fridge Is This?" (where photos of everyone's fridge are shared, and someone wins a prize for correctly linking attendee names with fridges), can be both an exercise in vulnerability for individuals who are sharing something simple about their lives and one that builds trust—all while costing nothing. Think of it this way: It's revealing for someone to share the inside of a personal space with coworkers. But if the whole office is doing so at the same time, such a simple exercise can spark connection and dialogue especially when the winner explains his or her thought processes: how he or she was able to match everyone with their food storage container.

Here's another simple idea that works both online and offline: play a game of "Never Have I Ever." The rules are pretty simple: Players take turns listing potential experiences they've never had, using the phrase "never have I ever…" If someone has, in fact, had the experience a coworker mentioned, he or she has to take some action—whether it's a sip of coffee or a spin in the office chair. Why would a company play such a game?—So employees can find out amusing or amazing new things about colleagues, which in turn fosters friendship and interest and supports the whole staff's laughter and sharing.

For those companies that don't want to take the time to play an amusing game like this during the day, there are other ways to promote sharing, including activities that also promote exercise. Many companies run softball programs, support running for charitable causes, have company exercise classes or encourage lunchtime walks. PwC (Price Waterhouse Coopers) used "walk and talks," where team leaders or project managers scheduled 30-minute chats by cell phone with colleagues while they walked to stay in touch during the pandemic, and employees found it so supportive, the company continued it even after the lockdown requirements were lifted. Consider this: when do you just talk to coworkers beyond the time-sensitive deliverable discussions? Knowing someone's partner is struggling with depression or their kid just got accepted into a specific school is connective and ultimately helps humanize coworkers.

Trainings bolster ROI

Boosting employee confidence through company-facilitated training and coaching is another way to support retention and connection. While both the staff who must attend these sessions and the executives picking up the tab might grumble about requiring such steps, when training is viewed as helping staff stay relevant and facilitating employees' day-to-day lives, it's much easier to take.

Most employees also quickly realize the value. I recently ran a training session at the fifth largest cable television provider in the nation for 25 mid-level directors where I helped them take their presentation skills to the next level. No one was excited initially about this activity, but after the training and one-on-one presentation evaluation sessions, I received great feedback. My favorite comment might have been: "Jen, that was dope," but even better was the client feedback confirming that the team's presentation skills were night-and-day better than before. That's money in the bank for the client.

A tiny suggestion with big payback

As more leaders are leaning into empathetic leadership styles, they are seeing how important it is to foster potentially connective moments.

One fun suggestion another company I work with tried was: they asked employees to start meetings by sharing something personal about themselves—a simple little fact about day-to-day existence such as what they were currently binge-watching.

Such simple sharing can start employees on the path to deeper connections by getting them to talk. It may take a while before ways are found to support connective moments where people are encouraged to openly talk about core values, but chatting is a good way to start, and companies who show they are supportive of connective moments have a means for eventual deeper insight into what motivates their people. This insight gives managers a direct line to understanding what type of motivation will be most effective moving forward and how people feel about their jobs.

Knowing what drives teams, and how the company can support more meaningfulness in staff work is a core way to strengthen and deepen relationships with employees. Those companies who can't find ways to help make the connections are missing out.

In today's world, where many feel disconnected from way too many things, giving staff a means to build friendships at work gives the company a way to support retention and boost productivity. ■

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END NOTES

[1]www.gallup.com/workplace/247391/fixable-problem-costs-businesses-trillion.aspx#:~:text=The%20cost%20of%20replacing%20an,to%20%242.6%20million%20per%20year

[2]www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/workplace-friendships.aspx

[3]www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/workplace-friendships.aspx

[4]hbr.org/2022/01/how-leaders-can-build-connection-in-a-disconnected-workplace

MICROMANAGING, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

meetings for both upward and downward communication. Delegation is much easier when the entire staff knows who is responsible for what and when owners and managers learn to set realistic deadlines and deliverables then communicate those two factors to the entire team. Also much easier to do is to provide positive reinforcements for accomplishments. A few ICPA companies are learning to use channels such as applications for mobile devices that exist to help employees connect with other employees (MyApp, Zoom or Microsoft Teams for example) or help the company with tracking or documenting processes (Process Street, Trello and many more).

Accept failures for what they are: learning opportunities. This sounds easy, but many micromanagers are perfectionists. They know when something is done right and cringe when it's done wrong. But learning through error is part of human nature. Turning a failure into a learning success is a way to delegate responsibility into the future.

Bolster listening skills. This is the most important skill a leader who wants to see his or her entire staff succeed can polish. Learning when to speak and when to listen affects every other tool an executive uses to be a better manager. Only by listening can leaders tap into the capabilities of their own staff.

As Steve Jobs once said, "It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do."

If Jobs was advising the readers of this article, that would translate to: Hire the right people and don't be afraid to listen. ■

GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection.** She encourages readers to send her ideas for issues they'd like to see covered in the magazine. Reach her at gsparente@verizon.net.

Six reasons employee termination efforts get stalled

BY ROXI BAHAR HEWERTSON, MPS, PCC

NO ONE QUESTIONS THE REALITY THAT FIRING OR LAYING SOMEONE OFF IS AN ONEROUS LEADERSHIP TASK. As executives and managers, we seek to look out for our employees; to provide them the best place to work that we can.

Still, there are going to be times when it is absolutely necessary to terminate employment—when the company's welfare must take priority. In those situations, the question becomes not if we must take action, but how and when to bring a relationship to a close. As many of us have discovered, firing right is just as important when you're a leader as hiring right. It's an emotionally loaded issue to fire someone, complicated and just plain uncomfortable no matter the circumstances. But firing wrong can have consequences we don't want.

If firing were easy, it might happen quicker and more often (and I wouldn't be writing this article). But whether a company is a large organization with hundreds of employees or a small plant with a few dozen staff, there will always be consistent under-performers and bad behaviors. Since the act of firing isn't easy, many leaders and managers hesitate (at best) and (at worst) fail to fire a person who needs to go.

In my many years as a leadership consultant and business coach, I've pinpointed six common blocks to firing. I outline them here with suggested antidotes:

Arrogance

One of the common thought patterns for those tasked with the responsibility of determining the status of an employee who discovers that person isn't working out is: "I hired you, so I couldn't be or don't want to be wrong."

Another word for this is ego. No one is perfect and the hiring process is always going to be a measured risk. Those who do the hiring often have no control over the choices hires then make to become their downfall. Leaders can only do their best to set staff up for success; they cannot make them succeed.

If company leaders have hired, on-boarded and developed the employee the right way, they've given it their best shot.

The antidote to arrogance and ego is to step back, apply objectivity, develop the ability to admit mistakes, be open-minded and pay close attention to both the data and the leaders' instincts instead of ego.

Conflict or pain avoidance

Avoidance is about pain: the employee's pain, the leader's pain or both. It can be a reluctance or fear of engaging in a potentially tough conversation or conflict. It's often about guilt. In the leaders' case, the guilt centers on the fact they hired someone who was unable to succeed (which tends to dismiss the reality that the person applied for and accepted the job).

There sometimes is an organizational myth that managers dealing directly and appropriately with bad behavior or poor performance are not being inclusive of diverse people or ideas. Leaders often think they didn't do enough to support this employee or they worry about doing damage to that person's future career or emotional state.

"No business can afford to 'carry' marginal or under-performing staff."

But feeling guilty or letting conflicts escalate helps no one, including the employee.

The antidote (depending on the situation of course) is to summon the courage to have a candid conversation about the situation with the employee. This will either transform the conflict into positive action by the employee or it will move that staff member closer to an exit process.

The fix-it syndrome

Most leaders know that providing appreciation, constructive feedback and development opportunities are important parts of their job. However, when all the evidence tells us an employee's ability to thrive in the job is just not there, prolonging the agony amplifies that employee's failure. No one can change another human being into someone they are not. Taking too long to recognize and address mismatch is unfair to both the employee and the organization.

Employee development does not replace employee responsibility, how those employees fit into the job or performance in that job. We all agree it's favorable to offer staff development, but development efforts should not continue when what's happening is getting the company and the employee nowhere fast. With all that's out there touting employee development, a common misconception is that it's the answer to every problem on the job. This is simply not true. No business can afford to "carry" marginal or under-performing staff. Trying to save an employee for an extended period, when it's clear the person is a mismatch for the job, is a mistake that can have far-reaching consequences.

The antidote to the fix-it syndrome is to perform due diligence, have direct and candid conversations whenever possible and, if possible, to support the departing employee in finding other employment options.

Image and perception

A common fear among leaders is that firing someone presents them as someone out of control or as bad decision makers. Some managers are afraid that rumors will fly if they fire someone, particularly a highly visible, well-known employee. Leaders who are concerned about this issue should keep in mind that it's far worse to ignore poor performance than it is to deal with it. No one can control rumors and gossip, but they can control communications and their own behavior and actions.

The antidote to image and perception concerns is to be as transparent as possible in communications without violating an employee's privacy.

Fear of loss

Leaders in today's reality of staff shortages often get stuck or frozen with the fear of disruptions to operations, especially when an employee has a key role in processes or is deeply embedded in positive relationships with external stakeholders (clients, customers, vendors, the public). Losses can include time, resources and the support of one or more stakeholders. There is a lingering fear of believing some employees are indispensable.

However, no one is indispensable, even the leaders themselves. Remember, too, that if a person leaves on his or her own, the company would still need to figure out how to replace him or her.

While it's a reality that some of what an employee does on the job could be mission-critical, if that person is doing real damage at the same time, the business has a very big problem. Justifying keeping someone because they are "so smart" or "know more than anyone about ABC" or are "loved by everyone" is not going to serve the organization or the individual leader in the long run.

Also, customers, employees and other stakeholders care more about getting the support or results they need than who, specifically, is providing for their needs. Stakeholders tend to have short memories when they are satisfied.

The antidote to fear of loss is having well-considered transition and communication plans that can be snapped into place immediately without leaving gaping holes in operations.

Fear of litigation

Leaders, human resource professionals and legal counsel may avoid a firing for fear of being sued, or in the case of a union, going to arbitration. This is particularly true when the employee is in a protected class (e.g: gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion or disability). Tiptoeing around someone whose performance is problematic sends a message of weakness and uncertainty both to the employee and everyone involved. While a full review of the facts (and legalities) and thoughtful consideration for factors such as whether bias is operating in a firing decision should always be given, fear of litigation should not drive hiring and firing decisions.

Companies that are confident that due diligence, fairness and objectivity (including documentation and discipline) have been addressed properly should have this viewpoint: the fact someone can sue does not mean he or she will. No one knows if that employee will take legal action, and even if he or she does, the employee rarely wins in cases where proper due diligence has been followed.

Two options frequently used by organizations when threatened by litigation or arbitration are to pay the employee enough to entice them to go away or to let the suit or arbitration proceed. It's surprising how many people back down when an employer lets a litigation or arbitration threat stand.

Employees who sue generally have to pay an attorney, and arbitrators who expect they are going to lose will often try to negotiate a settlement rather than spend great resources.

The antidote to fear of litigation is to be rigorous in documentation and conversations with the employee, and to be consistent with organizational values.

The bottom line

Anyone tasked with hiring people is most likely going to have to go through letting someone go. The six blocks I've mentioned (as well as the many this article can't cover) should not keep a leader from doing what they need to do when they need to do it. While I always advise employers to prevent trigger-happy firing situations, there are ways to allow smooth firings. Taking the time to fire at the right time and in the right way allows companies and their leaders to handle tricky situations as cleanly as possible while honoring the departing employee's dignity. ■

ROXI BAHAR HEWERTSON is a leadership expert, executive coach and organizational development expert with more than three decades of experience in higher education, business and non-profits. She is the CEO of Highland Consulting Group, Inc. and the author of Hire Right, Fire Right: A Leader's Guide to Finding and Keeping Your Best People and Lead Like It Matters...Because It Does. Connect with Hewertson at www.HighlandConsultingGroupinc.com.

ICPA has new leaders

The ICPA board voted unanimously this summer to approve Kerry Klodt, Tower Industries, as the new ICPA president for 2022-23. She takes over from ReBecca Erdmann, Sand & Swirl, who is now the immediate past president of the association.

Also approved is the new secretary Derek Hill, Synmar Products. Matt Pulliam with AGCO, Inc. will continue to serve as treasurer.

Stepping down this year are Dirk De Vuyst, International Marble Industries; Larry Branan, The R.J. Marshall Company; Doug Tibbetts, Tyvarian; and Kay Rehberg, ACS International. The board thanked all four for years of service to the industry.

New board members for the next two years include manufacturer director Laura Schmidt, Custom Marble, Inc.; and supplier directors Chris Hurdleston, ACS International; and Brian Ruether, The R.J. Marshall Company.

Other board members include:

Manufacturer directors Luke Haas, Elite Marble Company; and April Sauer, Manstone

Supplier directors Steve Wetzel, Interplastic Corporation; and Kelly DeBusk, Composites Compliance.

Policy is in place for reserve fund

One of the main goals ICPA put in place seven years ago when the association broke off and became its own entity was to continue to grow and protect the large reserve fund so that the association is economically stable. That point has been reached, and ICPA now has a legal policy document that allows drawing on these funds for association activities and priorities.

"The purpose of the reserve fund for ICPA, which is held in a Raymond James investment account, is to ensure the long-term ability of our organization to meet its mission," said Jennifer Towner, ICPA executive director. The money is an emergency fund to sustain the organization for at least three years in the event of unforeseen circumstances. The board has a policy in place that allows it to use remaining funds, in excess of that emergency fund, to pay for other expenses that will strengthen the association and the industry (such as special marketing campaigns and regulatory affairs expenses).

"The last few years have been eye-opening for the association and the entire board," says ICPA's Treasurer Matt Pulliam. "We set out to secure ICPA's longevity with this fund as well as continue to bolster value-add programs for our membership."

Pulliam is giving a full report of the reserve fund and other financial updates during the general session at POLYCON.

ICPA now has a membership director

Congratulations go out to Beth Kubinec, who was recently promoted to membership director for the association. She's been serving as membership coordinator for almost two years.

Kubinec is in charge of all aspects of the association that have to do with membership including: seeking new members, finding ways to add value for current members, ensuring members know how to get the most from their membership, updating membership information and assisting Jennifer Towner, executive director, and the membership committee, in membership drives.

Become active in the association

ICPA Executive Director Jennifer Towner and the ICPA board have asked members to consider volunteering for one of the association's specialty committees.

Being on a committee is one of the best ways to serve the industry, learn about new issues, lend expertise to fellow industry professionals, meet other leaders in the industry and get maximum value from ICPA membership.

Opportunities include: Membership committee, Live Grout Free marketing committee, technical committee and association event committee for The Buzz in April and POLYCON 2023 next September.

The association is also always on the lookout for members that will reach out and welcome new members to the organization.

Contact Jennifer Towner at jennifer@theicpa.com.

Marking 50 years as an organization

The year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Cultured Marble Institute, ICPA's predecessor association and the beginning of a formal national association.

Planners are now talking about how best to mark the momentous occasion. The association is also seeking historical information about the association as well as suggestions on how to celebrate the milestone.

Send information and suggestions to Jennifer Towner, ICPA executive director, at jennifer@theicpa.com.

Let's connect on Facebook

ICPA's Facebook Group is increasingly valuable to members as a way to reach out to other members and to stay connected to each other.

The ICPA private group page has 83 members, who are constantly commenting on issues of interest to the association and the industry. The page is also a go-to place for finding out current news about the industry and the association.

It's maintained by Linda Lullie, Inspired 2 Design, a marketing consultant for the association. Lullie posts frequently on news and issues of importance to ICPA members.

To join the Facebook group, visit www.facebook.com/groups/theicpa and click "Join Group." An administrator will approve requests as soon as possible.

Welcome new members

The following companies have joined ICPA this quarter:

- North Coast Cultured Products, Bridgeville, PA, www.northcoastmarble.com
- GMP–Granite and Marble Products Inc., Cordova, TN, www.gmp.builders.com
- Stoner, Inc., Quarryville, PA, www.stonermolding.com
- Hastings Air Energy Control, New Berlin, WI, www.hastingsair.com
- Kerrico Corporation, Selinsgrove, PA, www.kerricocorp.com

Home building market faces challenges

According to the National Association of Home Builders, confidence among home builders has taken a steep dive because of affordability challenges, rising interest rate challenges, material cost increases and a drop in buyer demand caused by home price appreciation.

In May, confidence fell to 69, a drop of eight points from the previous month. The industry has now seen eight straight months of similar declines. Confidence in spring stood at the lowest reading it's been since June 2020. At the same time, material costs were up 19% from a year ago, while mortgage rates had surged to a 12-year high.

New home sales fell in June to the lowest level since April 2020, reflecting the drop in confidence as well as construction bottlenecks. New home sales were down 13.4% in 2022 by mid-year, according to U.S. Census Bureau/Department of Housing and Urban Development data. However, new construction got a boost at the end of July when NAHB announced that for the entire second quarter of 2022, new homes rebounded. After falling steadily for five quarters, 21% of prospective buyers reported looking for a newly built home, which was up from the first quarter's 19%.

NAHB says growing sticker shot is contributing to the housing situation. According to the latest NAHB/Wells Fargo Housing Opportunity Index, just 42.8% of new and existing homes sold were affordable to a typical family.

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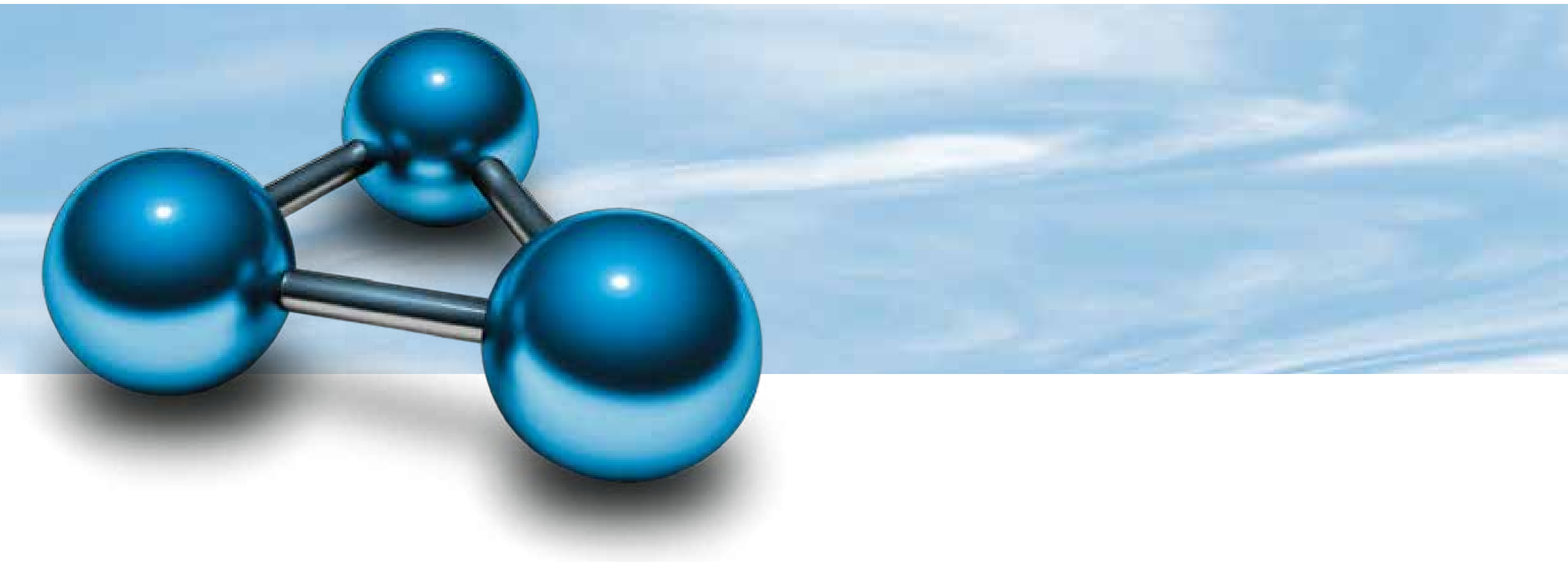

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