



Tom Aranow

Don't Go It Alone,

In a previous essay we wrote about what we called the “fatal flaws” in small business management. One of those flaws was the inability or reluctance of owner/managers to seek the help and input of others when making decisions.

In our experience there are a variety of reasons owners so often choose to go it alone. First, admitting they don't know something might not fit with their concept of being the boss. A client once told me “If my name is on the door, then I've got to have the answers. If I don't have the answers I shouldn't be the boss.” This point of view can also translate into the notion that ‘If you make the big bucks, you should have the answers’, but neither statement is true.

What is true is that if your name is on the door or if you make the big bucks you have to make the decisions, and to make the best decisions you need to engage more than one brain in searching for the best answers. After all, at least two heads and maybe more are better than one. Ultimately the decision will be yours. Allowing those employees or others who are qualified by intelligence or experience to help you doesn't mean you're shirking your responsibilities or that your business will become a democracy. It means you're making the best use of your resources.

Isolation also contributes to the poor decision making sometimes experienced by owner operators. It's a fact that it's lonely at the top, particularly if your company is small. Who do you go to on whether to take out that loan? To the welder? Perhaps the foreman? No. The answer is to seek out contact and engage in discussions with other people who own and operate businesses. There are a variety of organizations that can provide you with the ability to consult with other small business owners. Let them help you in brainstorming on your most important issues.

Perhaps the most lethal of the factors contributing to poor planning and decision making in small companies is the fact that many owner/operators are simply not aware of their own limitations. In short, they don't know what they don't know. Remember, isolation is common in small business. There's also little time to study new trends and best practices. How does ten years of working shoulder to the wheel, up early, home late, qualify the boss to make critical financial or personnel decisions?

Sometimes there is some bravado behind the reluctance to seek help, inside the company or out. None of us like to showcase our weaknesses. It's as if there were shame in being the boss and not knowing everything. For those who find it impossible to overcome that sense of shame there is an ironic truth. If, because your name is on the door you believe you have all the answers, you shouldn't be the boss.

by Tom Aranow, all rights reserved, 2006.