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Managing an apparel-decorating shop is a bit like being a quarterback. You're both the brains of the team and a primary participant in the action. It's up to you to call the play – to give direction – and to make sure everyone is on the same page, working as a unit to achieve a common goal. Success is contingent on you. Each play starts in your hands, and if you drop the ball, everything

breaks down. When, despite your best efforts, something goes awry, the pressure of finding a solution sits on your shoulders. You have to think fast but not panic – that is, react with grace under pressure or risk getting sacked.

It's a lot to handle. There's no shortage of long- and short-term challenges. But managers of thriving decorating businesses are leaping these hurdles with aplomb, leading their shops to success. To help shop managers everywhere mirror that performance, we've got insights into curing common managerial headaches from some of the nation's best managers of medium to large embroidery businesses. From hiring right to communication and organizational strategies, these stitch shop pros provide the wherewithal managers need to consistently lead their teams to touchdowns. "Managing well is essential to maintaining and increasing profitability," says Andy Shuman, general manager of Tipton, PA-based Rockland Embroidery (*asi/734150*).

Hire the Right People

One of the most pressing concerns that managers face is hiring quality employees. "Everything starts with having the right people," says Jeff Taxdahl, owner/manager of Jordan, MN-based Thread Logic, a 23-head shop with nine employees. "Without that, it's hard to get off the ground."

Beyond looking for people with the requisite skills, managers who hire well seek candidates with the right attitude. Even if the person lacks experience, aptitude and a genuine can-do spirit may make him or her a valuable addition. To identify such a person, it's critical during the interview process to ask meaningful questions that delve beyond a candidate's work experience and into their personality. So often, finding a candidate whose disposition and attributes match your shop's values makes the difference. "If you've got a good person who takes responsibility and who can function autonomously, it goes a long way," says Shuman, who oversees a staff of about 50, including embroidery operators, screen printers,

Be a Better Manager

Even the best managers have room for improvement. Here are a few tips for increasing your managerial acumen.

● **Spread Positivity:** Praise and reward your team members individually and collectively when they do a quality job. If the positive reinforcement is genuine, it helps energize and enthuse employees, which leads to better performance. If you only focus on where staffers fall short, you'll take the wind out of your team's sails.

● **Ask Your Team for Ideas:** By asking employees things like how they might make improvements to the shop or how to proceed on a certain challenging project, you build trust, show you value them, engender a real team spirit and gain insights that may well lead to more effective solutions than you would have conceived on your own.

● **Practice What You Preach:** Want staff to act and perform a certain way? Then set the standard by acting and performing that way yourself. The good example can be contagious.

● **Take Hold of the Reins:** For some, setting parameters and goals, providing staff with feedback, and making the big decisions can seem daunting. But that's a manager's job. Be specific about objectives, clearly communicate expectations, and make decisions based on sound, considered rationales that can be explained. Being wishy-washy, vague and retiring will only complicate things.

● **Lend an Ear:** When staff comes to you with questions, concerns or ideas, be sure to listen. You may end up gaining valuable insight that helps the shop run better or heads off a problem before it becomes a major issue. Even if none of that occurs, you show the employee that you value his or her input, reinforcing a positive atmosphere that can help spur efficiency and quality performance.

shippers, customer service personnel and more.

While advertising and walk-in applicants may help a shop find ideal workers, many savvy shop managers prefer to rely on referrals from trusted employees. Thread Logic has leveraged referrals to bring excellent new staffers on board. "Our employees understand our company – what we stand for, our culture," Taxdahl says. "They refer people who they know will fit in well and who are capable of doing the job." In addition to referrals, Rockland uses a human resources company to help find quality candidates. The firm has had particular success linking Rockland to exemplary customer service personnel. "They've done phenomenally well for us," Shuman says.

Communicate Proactively

Another sizable obstacle that managers continually contend with is communication. Breakdowns in communication can quickly lead to breakdowns in business, and it's often incumbent on managers to convey everything from company goals and vision, to specific employee responsibilities and important details on individual orders. "Communication is the number-one problem in any organization," says Nathan Milhoan, owner/manager of Tempe, AZ-based AzCa Embroidery (*asi/701972*), a 42-head shop with 14 employees.

The crux of effective communication lies in relaying information clearly and often. To keep the static at bay, AzCa "over-communicates," Milhoan says. Daily, weekly and monthly production goals are posted in the shop for all to see. Progress is recorded there, too. Additionally, Milhoan provides employees with individual goals that are checked and monitored on a quarterly basis. In person, Milhoan communicates collections, sales orders and invoicing goals to staff responsible for those activities, which are monitored daily and weekly. "From communicating jobs to the operators," says Milhoan, "to communicating to the rest

of the staff that you are leaving for lunch – everything is communicated so that we work as one cohesive unit with no misunderstandings."

Keeping such open lines has proved pivotal in helping AzCa pass difficult tests with flying colors. Recently, Milhoan decided to add more embroidery machines, a move that resulted in scheduling changes and new roles for some employees. Rather than just shake up the shop, however, Milhoan extensively explained everything ahead of time. Believing that communication is a two-way street, Milhoan also invited input and advice from staffers on how best to proceed. "When the day of the change came, it went very smoothly," he says. "I know that if we had just made the change without asking for input and without informing everyone of the change and how it would affect them, this would have been a completely different outcome."

Plan Efficient Workflow

The old saying – "Time is money" – is especially true in the decorating industry. The more efficient and mistake-free a shop is, the more profitable it can be. Not surprisingly, then, a significant challenge managers face is establishing a workflow process and deploying personnel as strategically as possible to maximize efficiency.

Generally speaking, top managers seek to create a logical layout in which blank apparel moves with as few steps as possible from receiving, to staging, to prep, and then onto the embroidery machines before heading to finishing and shipping. When it comes to specifics, however, each shop is different. Managers say it's crucial to analyze your shop's situation to determine how best to get orders swiftly and accurately out the door, especially since rush orders have become so prevalent.

At Eagan, MN-based Team Mates Inc. (*asi/90674*), the 67-head shop's 11 employees are divided into two production departments, each overseen by a

“Managing well is essential to maintaining and increasing profitability.”

Andy Shuman, *Rockland Embroidery* (asi/734150)

manager. Every morning, Department Managers Katie Mirick and Linda Zuther meet to discuss the day's workload. If one department is swamped or up against an immovable rush order deadline, the other team swoops in to help. “We have a lot of customers who ask for things same-day or next-day, so coordinating orders and being flexible is important,” Mirick says.

So is cross-training employees. Good managers ensure that staffers know how to do multiple jobs, so if a machine operator or trimmer is out, then another staffer can step in and do the work. At Thread Logic, for instance, one person handles shipping, but three people are trained on shipping procedures. “If our shipper isn't in,” says Taxdahl, “the orders still get out the door.” This helps negate disruption to order flow, keeping the efficiency bar set high.

Motivate Staff

Even the best, most well-trained staffers aren't robots. They're not going to wake up every day enthused to run an embroidery machine or field calls from difficult customers. “It's sometimes tough,” Milhoan says, “to stay upbeat and do the job to the best of your abilities day after day.”

Good managers recognize this, and provide incentives that re-energize employees. If, for example, an employee meets a yearly goal, AzCa sends the achiever on an all-expenses-paid trip. Furthermore, AzCa offers weekly bonuses if objectives are met, as well as other awards for jobs well done. “Sometimes it's a trip to play laser tag; other times it's as simple as pizza for everyone,” Milhoan says. Some shops offer monetary benefits, time off, gifts and more when collective and/or individual objectives are surpassed. “The trick is to keep everyone highly motivated,” Milhoan says.

Be Fair to All

As with motivation, managers must also account for the complexities of human psychology when it comes to employees' perceptions of fairness. Few things can upset the harmony – and thus the workflow – of a shop quicker than the sense among some that certain staffers receive preferential treatment.

To keep a level playing field, many shops institute a clear set of standards. Shops like Rockland and Thread Logic have an employee handbook that lays out rules, expectations and various procedures. “It's across the board and fair for everyone,” Taxdahl says.

While written standards are a start, they're worthless unless managers ensure the standards are applied equitably, whether it regards pay and vacation time or something else, like scheduling. Indeed, the subject of fairness can become a sticky one when it comes to work schedule, a complication born, in part, because order loads can ebb and flow substantially through the course of a year. During slower times, shops sometimes are compelled to have a staffer stay home for a day or two. To prevent that, Team Mates' Mirick and Zuther juggle jobs around in an effort to keep everyone busy. If there just isn't enough work to stretch, a staffer may be given a day off. Still, where the fairness factor comes into play is that the managers always rotate who stays home. The upshot is that no single employee feels his or her hours are always being cut. “We do everything we can to make sure everyone has an even number of hours,” Mirick says.

Control Purse Strings

While mastering manpower management is essential, shop overseers must also

grapple with an equally daunting task: financials. Striking the balance between keeping costs down and profit-producing efficiency up occupies managers daily. To succeed here, managers must be organized and tuned into the fine print. Strategic purchasing and assiduous tracking of expenses and the true profitability of each order is key.

At Rockland, Shuman has intelligent purchasing down to a near science. He routinely analyzes and renegotiates contracts for sizable expenditures like health insurance and shipping. In so doing, he helps ensure Rockland gets as much bang for its buck as market conditions will allow. Shuman is also attuned to the littler things. Rather than buy smaller volumes of thread a few times a week, for example, he strives to order a larger quantity once every couple of weeks. Rockland saves money as a result. “As a manager, you have to pay close attention to your spending or things can get out of control quickly,” he says.

To help rein things in, managers are increasingly relying on technology solutions like quality business management software. St. Cloud, MN-based Dubow Textile (*asi/700107*) built its own proprietary management system that handles everything from preliminary quotes through to accounting, allowing Owner Rob Dubow and his management team to track order volumes and the bottom line on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis. “It's all at our fingertips,” Dubow says. “History goes by really quickly, and you need to know where you are today to build for a successful tomorrow.”

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