

# What Motivates an Owner

by Les Cunningham

*Posted: July 22, 2010*



As an employee of a restoration firm, I don't have to tell you that owners are weird, because you figured that out a long time ago. What I would like to do is to try to explain some of the reasons why they are weird.

I find it's helpful if employees understand what owners are looking for in their staff. A lot of employees who have worked at their job for a while still don't understand what owners are looking for in a "good" employee. Most employees I've spoken with would like to know more about what motivates an owner, to know what would be some good thoughts and actions to take that would cause the owner to see them as a "good" employee.

## Owners Have Control Issues

You've probably noticed that owners have a very difficult time letting go of things in their company. Consider that the behavior that they are exhibiting is like that of a parent who wants to protect their child from harm. In essence, the owner was the very first employee of the company. They dreamed the company up, they built it and financed it from the moment of its birth to right now.

You could compare it to the similar process that one goes through in the process of preparing for a child that they have dreamed about and brought to life. As you already know, owners are very particular about some things that the company does and not so particular about other things that the company does. As the business gets more mature, they begin to find themselves in a position of wanting to not do all of the work. As the business grows and/or they want to slow down, they find themselves needing help to continue the direction they want the business to go. They have come to the realization that they can no longer do all of the work themselves. This does not mean that they want you do it your way; on the contrary, they still want it done their way.

## Owners Believe in Telepathy



Owners believe they have told you exactly how they want things done, and they also believe you understand exactly how they want it done. Sometimes an owner's memory decreases as he gets older, or he may not have ever explained to you what they wanted, but in his mind he is very, very sure that somewhere along the line he told you exactly what you need to know.

The secret for the employee is to get what the owner wants done in writing, so that you, the employee, can deliver exactly what and how he wants things done. The moral of the story is to ask if it is written down and, if it is, follow those directions to the letter. If it is not written down, ask the questions that you need answered, put it in writing and have both of you sign off on what needs to be done. Doing this will start the process required for the owner to trust you. Once the owner trusts that you are doing it his way, he will leave you alone...for a while.

## Owners Like to Check...and Check Again

You've probably already noticed that the owner cannot help herself sometimes. She has a driving need to check that things are being done the right way; her way, of course!

Owners struggle with this issue on an on going basis. It is actually a two-level process. In the beginning, they struggle with whether or not they can trust their employees. This is ongoing with each individual employee. If at some time in the relationship it does not go as the owner thinks it should go, they will start the trust process over from the beginning.

Once they feel they can trust the employee, they feel a need to intermittently and sporadically verify their trust of the employee. This usually has nothing to do with the employee, but everything to do with the owner's driving fear that the employee will put them and/or the company into a position from which they cannot recover, and thus both the owner and the business would fail.

An owner generally has a lot more at risk than an employee does. They have indebted themselves through borrowing money, using their home and other assets to guarantee repayment of the borrowed money. So, if the

business were to fail, the owner would be wiped out and, as a result, might be faced with having to work for the rest of her life paying off debt and possibly never be able to get ahead again.

## **Owners Have the Fear**

Owners are very fear-driven. Some owners handle it better than others, but they all usually take one of two courses of action. The first course of action is the most common, especially when they first start their company. They start as a dictator and gradually work themselves into becoming a benevolent dictator.



They feel that they can let their employees to do things to a point, but they still have to spot check on things to insure things are being done correctly. This is not a trait that most owners can ever get rid of. When an owner is a benevolent dictator, they use interrogation to find out how things are going or not going. Most employees do not work well under this kind of situation. Because of the risk owners feel they are taking, they have a burning need to know what is going on in the company. So if this is the way that owners think and act, what can be done to get the owners “off of the backs” of the employees? The answer is: nothing. Owners are going to continue this behavior, whether the employee likes it or not. It’s at the very core of their business existence.

The second option or stage of growth is to institute systems throughout the business. By having systems, all employees can know what is going on at any time. Systems that integrate existing company system into computer software allow the employees to know what is expected of them, and also allow the owner to satisfy their compelling need to always know what is going on.

When owners realize they have the information they need to feel comfortable available to them, they will back off from using the interrogation tactics of a benevolent dictator. They can check for information at any time of day or night. Once they realize that, they will relax their grip on the company, which will then allow the employees to feel a lot less stress!

The pressures that owners have to operate under are sometimes enormous. What helps them get through it is to have enough good employees to get

them through the day-to-day. I hope this better illustrates what the mindset of the owner is, and helps you, as an employee, understand where they are coming from.

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