

March 21, 2002

Getting bang for the buck

Firms trade tips on how to keep a productive staff in lean times

By Richard Lee
Staff Writer

Getting more out of less. It's a personnel dilemma that companies of all sizes are grappling with as they try to emerge from the recession and regain their position in the marketplace.

Business representatives gathered yesterday at BKM Total Office in Stamford to get some tips from consultants on how to operate their companies and staff more efficiently.

"Communication is absolutely the key," said David Lewis, president of OperationsInc.com in Stamford, referring to how to deal with employees about their company's future.

They end up beating themselves into the ground."

He also recommended matching up the most productive workers with younger, talented employees, providing the younger worker with skills and hope for advancement.

Cross-training in job responsibilities also is essential so a business will not be crippled if a company loses a worker, Lewis said. He remembered urging a small firm to hire a second salesperson to be in place should its salesman, a U.S. Marine reservist, be called to active duty.

The company did, and a short time later the Marines called up the reservist-salesman.

Despite its best efforts, a company may have to face the reality of layoffs, Lewis said, because they hired uninspired employees during boom times to fill positions and meet clients' demands.

"You have a bottom layer in an organization, everyone does. The tough part is you have to do something about that. You take the bottom 5 percent and show them the door," Lewis said.

Companies that are operating at full capacity and trying to get by with a minimum of staff could be asking for trouble, Lewis added.

"Organizations that are operating at 110 percent and

"The more honest you are, the more respect you're going to garner. Don't promise anything that is out of your control."

Employees also should be required to assess their jobs, documenting their tasks to determine redundancies and streamline operations, freeing workers to do other things.

Lewis recalled examining customer service operations at a company and discovering two departments were doing basically the same thing. "We realized that they could save 40 percent of their employees' time."

As another example, he recalled receiving three notifications of an event from the same company, sent by different departments.

"Is there someone at the top watching? Because no one is acting as the master conductor, you'll end up with these problems," Lewis said.

To ensure a smooth operation, Lewis said, a chief executive officer must seek out employees who are striving to do more and have evidenced desire to grow with the company.

"Don't mistake a doer from a leader. Match the task with the person. Is the intimidated, low-key, lack-of-passion person the one making cold calls?" asked Lewis, urging that management be on the lookout for overworked employees. "Most times, it's probably your best performer.

looking for an upturn are playing with fire," he said, responding to a question from the audience. Lewis recommended that they accumulate a collection of qualified candidates for possible expansion.

Lewis' comments made sense to Brad Fisher, president of 10X Partners in Greenwich, a consulting firm that focuses on accelerating clients' sales.

"We've found our business exploding. I need to establish a solid foundation so we can grow and we don't have hiccups for our clients," Fisher said. "I learned that it's important to match the job with the person and not let an employee slide into a position by default."

When streamlining, offering workplace flexibility can result in the retention of valuable employees, said Nadine Mockler, a principal at Flexible Resources Inc., a Greenwich human resources and consulting firm.

More companies are learning to value an employee's skill over the number of hours logged and are measuring results, not "face time," she said.

"People want more time and control over their lives, and we all want to optimize our work force and draw the best people possible," said Mockler, stressing the need to take advantage of modern technology to allow employees more flexibility in their jobs.

"I don't know about you, but I'm about ready to blow up I-95," she said. "Telecommuting is a wonderful option. We've been blessed with all this technology so we don't have to sit behind our desks. When you're happy, you work better."

Telecommuting, however, is not for everyone, she said, stressing that it can be abused.

In some cases, it may be better to hire two skilled part-timers to fill a vacant full-time position, Mockler said, reminding the audience that most part-time positions do not include benefits.

Experienced contract workers also are an option. "They can hit the ground running when an employee is out on leave," Mockler said.

But laying off staff during economic downturns can backfire on a company, Mockler warned.

"What happens when business gets better?" she asked, suggesting that companies consider reducing employees' hours, instead, if they agree. "That way, you retain your keep people that way."

Inroads, a business that links minority high school seniors and college students with companies through internships

and workshops, has a flex-time policy for employees, said Phillip P. Anderson, manager, affiliate services, at the Stamford office.

"(This gathering) helped me to confirm some of my beliefs," he said. "I took crib notes on some things I can do in my office right away."