



Promoting from within allows you to develop a manager who already possesses knowledge specific to pet retailing.

Developing a Store Manager

Molding a stellar employee into a top manager is no easy task. But with the right approach, you can make the process a little less daunting. By Jeff Siegel

Ask pet retailers about turning employees into managers, and it seems like everyone has a horror story. How about the man who was humble and hard-working until he got a little authority—and started bossing everyone around, including the boss? Or the woman who was organized and collected until she became a manager—and suddenly seemed to be hardly organized and collected at all?

And that doesn't even include the problem of replacing the employee on the sales floor. After all, if an employee is talented enough to be promoted, he or she probably is one of the store's best salespeople.

So it's not surprising that elevating someone to management is even more complex than it seems. It's one thing to work the floor well, but it's an entirely

different story when you're asking an employee to supervise former peers while being on a more equal footing with the owner.

"You have to find someone who can be a buffer with staff, who knows almost as much about the business as you do, and has your spirit for the mission," said Harry Friedman, founder of The Friedman Group (Culver City, Calif.), one of the country's top retail consulting and training companies.

The development process requires an understanding of what the store manager is supposed to do after he or she is promoted—and also requires that the owner let the manager manage.

"Talk to independent owners, and most of them will tell you that they want someone to manage the store so they can do other things," said Friedman. "But do

they really want that? If their store is wife, mistress and hobby, if they love to mix it up on the floor, if that's what they want, then they really don't need a manager."

Assuming you really do want a store manager, you can make the promotion process go as smoothly as possible by following three key steps.

Identify Good Prospects

Owners and operators must be able to identify employees who can make the transition to manager while realizing that the skills that make someone a good employee don't necessarily make them a good boss. Showing up on time, engaging customers and working well with the rest of the staff is only the beginning.

"Most people will say, 'Yes, I want to be promoted,' if you ask them, but that doesn't mean they're ready for the job," said Billie G. Blair, Ph.D., president and chief executive officer of Change Strategists Inc. (Los Angeles). "You have to find what it means to them, and whether that's what you want."

"What qualifies them for promotion is a positive performance track record and demonstrated ability, versus just interest or a willingness, to take on additional responsibilities to succeed," said Sara LaForest, a founding partner in Kubica LaForest Consulting (Warwick, R.I.), a management consulting company.

Questions to ask yourself about potential managers:

- **Do they know the nuts and bolts of the pet business?** An advantage to promoting from within: Your manager will already possess knowledge specific to pet retailing. "Our customers expect our employees and our managers to be able to answer their questions, and they have difficult questions," said Renae Click, whose family owns six Tomlinson's Pet Supplies in Austin, Texas. "What can they feed a diabetic dog? The cat stopped using the litter box; what should they do? Someone who doesn't have that knowledge, no matter how much retail experience they have, isn't going to work out."

- **Do they understand your store?** Institutional memory and the owner's philosophy are crucial to successful retailing, especially for independents. Do

managerial candidates know why the store exists? Do they know the stories and anecdotes that are part of the store's history? Do they realize why you want customers treated the way you do?

"This isn't a stereo store, where the employees look down on the customers because they don't know anything," said Gary Knabe, owner of Elmer's Aquarium & Pet Center (Monroeville, Pa.), an 8,000-square-foot fish store that also sells small animals and supplies. "We don't want that thinly disguised contempt."

- **Are they independent enough to stand on their own?** It's not enough to be able to run the store in your absence. Can they do what you need done, but also offer their opinions if they disagree with yours? If they know of a better way to do something, will they tell you what it is—even if you don't want to hear it?

- **Can they be a boss?** This involves more than telling other employees what to do. Can they separate themselves from the group of people they used to work with and retain that group's respect? "They need good leadership skills," said Click, whose company uses personality testing to help identify potential managers. "It's not enough to be a hard worker. Can they communicate? Can they delegate? There needs to be a balance."

Define the Job

Not only do you have to know what you're looking for in a manager, you also have to make sure you define the job in every way, shape and form. A manager who doesn't know what he or she is supposed to do may be worse than no manager at all, said Blair. "That's the

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Tips for Leaders

THINK IT'S TIME to find leadership in your store? Here are some tips:

- **Understand the new leadership style.** The focus is moving toward creativity, empathy, intuition and the ability to link seemingly unrelated objects and events into something new and different. That means leaders must create and maintain a safe, respectful environment where individual creativity can emerge to its fullest potential, and focus that creative energy in the right direction based upon the core purpose of the team and the targeted goals.

- **Search for untapped talent on your team.** Employees are far more complex and unique than they might appear at first glance. Unearthing the hidden talents your employees possess is the first step toward using these areas of hidden development to your team's advantage.

- **Encourage creative abrasion.** Conflict is natural, expected, and, because it's a sign of diverse thinking on your team, even desirable. However, leaders must take steps to keep the conflict focused on the issues and not let team members direct their ire at one another personally.

- **Don't keep too tight a lid on the jar.** A leader who dominates and controls his or her team will squelch creativity. If you're the leader, you must take deliberate steps not to do this. For instance, don't sit at the head of the table. Don't get into a prolonged conversation with only one or two other team members. Offer your opinion last in a meeting, and when you do share your opinion, be sure that you clearly show that you value what others have said before you. It takes a good leader to know a good leader.

Source: Kimberly Douglas, author of The Firefly Effect

most common mistake that store owners make," she said. "They push someone in a manager's position just like that. It's unfair to the individual, and it's unfair to the business and especially to the bottom line."

Determine the scope of the manager's responsibilities. Is it just supervising employees on the sales floor, or will he or she be responsible for setting sales goals, handling marketing and promotions, and managing inventory? Making a schedule is one thing; optimizing the store's performance is something else entirely.

"You've got to have metrics," said Friedman. "The manager has to know what he is responsible for. If you put them in the position where they are responsible for what happens, but don't have any way to track it, you aren't going to know why anything has happened."

Develop a Training Program

Armed with the desire to delegate and a detailed job description, you're ready to train your new manager. That's the most important part of the promotion process,

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because none of the rest of it matters if you don't train the candidates properly, said Blair.

That means developing a formal training program, said the experts and retailers interviewed for this story. If a potential manager isn't going to work out, a longer and more formalized process is more likely to show that.

The length of the training process can vary, depending on the store's needs and the experience of the employee. But count on a minimum of six months, and don't be surprised if it takes longer than that, said Click. It's not just that the new manager has a lot to learn, but that he or she has to learn how to use that knowledge.

Mentoring plays a big role. "Let them shadow a manager and see what goes on," said Blair. "If you don't do it on a daily basis, they're not going to get the full picture of how everything fits together."

Give the manager-in-training a chance to communicate what they've learned or don't understand. Knabe said that monthly manager meetings—which potential managers attend—are one of the most important parts of his store's training process. In the meetings, Knabe and his employees talk about specific problems, give concrete examples about dealing with customers (how to help someone who returns a broken filter, for example), and go over the store's general philosophy.

"Ninety-eight percent of the people who come into the store aren't trying to cheat you," said Knabe. "The manager's approach needs to be geared towards that. Most managers, they're more prone to draw a line in the sand with customers. So that's why you have to tell them about your company, about your philosophy, that if they understand that, they'll be successful. We tell them, 'If the store broke even and the customer left happy, then we're happy. We're not going to second-guess you.'"

Finally, use the length of the training period to give the potential manager a chance to attend management classes or seminars from a community college, chamber of commerce and the like. This is especially helpful for younger employees who usually don't have the work experience to fill in some of the gaps in the management process, said Blair.

In the end, said Friedman, the promotion process is about the difference

between hiring a manager and hiring someone who is just going to be management—the kind of employee who writes someone up because they don't understand that discipline is only one small part of what a manager needs to do.

Making the business more successful is what the manager needs to do. ■

Jeff Siegel is a freelance writer in Dallas. He has covered the pet industry for nearly 20 years.

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