

David Zick, Founder and President, Group Associates, Inc.

Smart Leaders

Stretching yourself

HOW TO GIVE EMPLOYEES THE POWER TO CHALLENGE YOU

Interviewed By Brooke Bates

David Zick doesn't expect his company to grow without a little stretching of his own.

"I kiddingly tell people that I try to run the company from the seat of my pants. And although I'm heavier than I used to be, the company grew faster than I was able to get fatter," jokes Zick, the president of Group Associates Inc., whose plan for growth is more intentional than he makes it sound.

Zick founded the company in 1986 to provide employee benefit plan management



solutions to companies, and Group Associates continues to soar, growing 25 percent in 2008 to revenue of \$11 million.

Zick's own growth, then, is not far behind.

"I realized that if the company was to continue to grow, that I have to grow too," he says. "I can't just expect the company to grow and grow and me to be the same."

So he encourages his 80 employees to challenge his decisions and push him out of his comfort zone.

Smart Business spoke with Zick about empowering your employees to stretch your limits.

Avoid micromanaging. You can't micromanage growth. You have to empower others. Only by multiplying yourself through other people and letting them make decisions can you grow.

What I do instead of micromanaging is I just ask for very regular updates in terms of the progress. I want to know as you go through this process what you're doing and that you're making progress toward getting it done.

But then you have to back away and not watch them do it. You have to walk away from it.

Tell employees they're empowered.

I told the employees in the newsletter that if they know of a better way to do something, don't just assume that somebody else figured out that the way it's being done right now is the right way. If they see something that's being done that they think is wrong, it might not be wrong, but ask. Say, 'I see that this is happening. From what I know, it doesn't look like it's right,' recognizing that they don't know everything.

I'd rather somebody question something before it's in front of our client than to have our client come back and say, 'This is wrong,' and then have an employee say, 'I thought it was wrong.' So we encourage employees to come to us.

Take questions and ask your own.

When they come to me with a question, I ask them what they think we ought to do. Then I say, 'Have you considered this factor?' And many times, they haven't considered all the factors that go into making the decision.

Then I want to find out, 'What do they know that I don't know? Maybe they've talked to the client that I haven't talked to. Maybe they've been doing a process I haven't actually physically been doing. So what you need to do is find out what it is they know that you didn't know.'

The best way to help a person make a change in their decision is to tell the person, 'I understand you made this decision. I'm wondering if you understood this fact, and that your decision is going to do this. If you weren't aware of it, if somebody hadn't told you,'—so that you try to make

your work is bad. We're talking about this as a positive for the organization.'

And just as employees have seen me be open to criticism, I point to myself and I say, 'Remember the meeting we had where everybody was upset with me [because] they didn't think that I was doing [what] I should be doing? I listened to that, and I've incorporated that in what I've done. You need to do the same thing.' It can't be just, 'Do as I say.'

Try to grow. One hamburger is not going to change your life. But 1,000 of them over five years could put 10

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it so it's not their fault—then maybe you might have a different decision. Or maybe you already considered this fact, and despite it, you've decided to do it. My job is just to make sure that you know everything that you should know to make a decision.'

Lead by example. It was a problem with some other managers [that] when people would confront them, they were defensive instead of open to suggestion and [to] receive criticism in a positive manner. [I tell them,] 'We're not talking about this because we're unhappy with you or because

or 15 pounds on you. If you don't exercise one day, you're not going to have a heart attack the next day. But if you don't exercise ever, then you're going to be far less healthy than had you exercised.

In the same way in business, if I don't try to improve, it won't really affect me tomorrow. But when you compound a lot of tomorrows, it will have a big impact. Do the thing that's a little bit more difficult. It's more difficult to confront an employee with some behavior that's not quite what you want than it is just to ignore it and hope that it goes away. <<

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