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How to build the perfect team: Q&A with award-winning author and business coach Nancy Butler

There's no magic wand you can wave that will transform your team into the Avengers. However, there are qualities that you can see and others you should avoid when building your new team. We spoke with Above All Else author and business coach Nancy Butler about how to build the right team from the ground up. In this interview, Butler talks about her "Only touch things once" theory, discusses the best ways to train your team, and reveals the biggest obstacles she's faced while building a business.

1. As a business owner or manager, how do you choose the right team?

I discovered three things about building a team: first, what are the things I do well, and if I did them all day, I would leave at the end of the day feeling energized? Second, what are the things I do well, but if I did them all day I would leave exhausted and miserable? And third, what are the things I do because I feel I have to, but am not good at and shouldn't be doing at all?

Instead of searching for people that were the same as me, I looked for the opposite. The goal was to get as close as possible to everyone doing the tasks they really enjoy, are good at, and make them want to come to work.

And although this may not be 100% possible, I was able to get extremely close. I have since sold that business, but the last time I checked, everyone was still working there. Everyone has been employed there at the same small business for over 15 years in an industry that often has high staff turnover.

2. What is your "Only touch things once" idea and how does that help teams work more efficiently?

I have a rule that, whenever possible, I only touch things once. Most every business has tasks or projects that are worked on many times throughout the day, month or year. Whenever there is a repeatable task, there should always be a well documented system in place to enable greater efficiency and effectiveness. Technology can be a great tool to help automate many processes. Figure it out once, document it, and then follow the plan. You do not need to reinvent the wheel every time the same task needs to be completed.

Here is an example of how this strategy can be effectively implemented to save both time and money: whenever a client called the office for a service issue the staff would give me a note to call them back. That was extremely inefficient and time-consuming for both the client and me. Instead a system was put into place; the staff was trained on what to ask the client, and they set a next appointment right then for when someone in the office (which may or may not be me) would be calling them back to address the issue. The staff was also trained on how to research the issues that clients may have, and to provide me

the documentation needed to handle the issue appropriately before my phone appointment. That way, in one touch, we look over the information and already have a specific time to connect with the client with an answer to their question or update them on the status of their request. I no longer had to call and call to try to reach the client again, and the client could usually be contacted only once, in a reasonable period of time, with an answer to their issue.

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3. What do you think about cross-training people vs. having them specialize in one area? Which is better, and how do managers decide?

It is important that the success of the business is not reliant on any one person, including the owner. If someone was out sick, away on vacation, quit, or was out for any reason, systems should be in place to enable others in the office to easily step in and see what needs to be done and have the skills to complete it.

Cross-training and documenting all systems in an office is imperative not only for the smooth running of the office, but also for your clients.

One reason this was so important to me for my former business is that I was managing other people's money. There was a time when I became very ill, in and out of the hospital several times in six months, including an emergency surgery. If I did not have a qualified, reliable person to step up in my place, what would my clients do? I would also run the risk of losing clients because of my unpredictable circumstances.

Since I did have good systems in place, not a beat was missed and everyone was well taken care of – which also took a lot off of my mind, so I could focus on what I needed to do to get well.

4. What was the largest obstacle you faced during the growth of your company, and how did you overcome it?

The largest obstacle I had to overcome is one that many small business owners have; when to hire more staff.

I knew I had reached a point when I could no longer do it all myself, but I also knew the business wasn't bringing in enough income to afford hiring staff.

I started by bringing on a high school student a few hours a week to do the simpler things like filing and stuffing envelopes. The first time I tried to find a very important paper and couldn't access it because it had been filed incorrectly, I quickly learned that you get what you pay for.

The lesson learned is: do not wait until you can afford staff to hire them. If you hire the right person for the right job, they will more than pay for themselves. For me, this meant someone else could do the simpler tasks allowing me to spend more time doing a better job for my clients and bringing in more money to the business. Once I took the leap of faith and hired the right person at an appropriate level of pay, my business took off very quickly.

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