

Bare Bones Business

SBJ's newest opinion page columnist, Ellen Rohr of Bare Bones Biz, says a business retreat can do wonders, even for small businesses. **Page 27**



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Take time out to move company forward

"So, you two aren't on the same page," I offered, in an effort to soothe the raving woman on the other end of the phone line.

"The SAME PAGE?" she shouted, "We aren't even in the same BOOK! We aren't in the same UNIVERSE! I've HAD it!"

"Last year, we agreed to expand the business," she continued, barely pausing for a breath. "I wrote a business plan for growing from two trucks to four trucks. I found a great deal on service trucks and established a relationship with a good leasing company. For months, I have been looking for a piece of commercial real estate, because we just can't continue to operate out of our home. I found a couple of properties that seem promising. And yesterday I interviewed a service plumber who really knows what she is doing.

"But, now that it's time to make a move, my husband is acting like he's hearing about these plans for the first time! He actually said, 'No need to rush into anything. More trucks, more bills and more employees? Sounds like more headaches.' Aaaaargh! Can you believe it?"

"I can believe it," I responded. "I suggest you call a time out."

She sighed and continued in a smaller voice, "You're right. How can I stay married to a man who is so out of touch ..."

"No! That's not what I mean," I interrupted, instantly aware of how difficult it can be to communicate. "I mean a time out from the business. How about taking a day to



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Ellen Rohr

regroup? Schedule a retreat. Take some time to get on the same page with your husband about the company. Then, renewed, refreshed and reunited, you can move forward."

She settled down. A time out sounded better than a divorce.

How about you? Are you committed to a plan of action, but your partner isn't buying it? Perhaps you've agreed to expand the company, but you notice he never looks at the new marketing plan you've put together.

It's time for a time out. Big companies call this strategic planning. Small shops rarely do this, which is one of the reasons small companies stay small, even when the owners want the company to grow.

I'm not suggesting that you have to become a big company. I am suggesting that you discover what you do want, and make sure that all the big cheeses in your company are in agreement and in communication about where you are going and how you are going to get there.

Here are some ideas for structuring your Small Shop's Strategic Planning meeting. It's time for a time out!

Who takes the time out? In a small shop, all the owners definitely should attend. The managers ... perhaps. If the owners are at odds with each other, they should hammer things out before dragging the employees into it.

You'll need at least a day. What? You can't spare a day? The business will fall apart if all of you are out of the office? Well, you could all DIE, and the rest of the world would go on. Really. The company will be fine without you for a day. Pick a day, and stick to it.

Go away! Book a hotel room. Or check out our local libraries. They have nice meeting rooms that you can use.

Bring food and drinks with you. Have refreshments

available all day long. No alcohol. You want to maintain clear thinking and steady blood sugar levels.

Be the leader. You may not be at the top of the organizational chart, but if this meeting is your idea, take charge today. Type up and hand out the agenda in advance. Sample agenda:

- What is our mission, our company's purpose for being?
- Whom do we serve?
- Does this company serve us? How is it failing to serve?
- Does this company serve our employees?
- What would our company look like if it were perfect in every detail? How would it be? Write it down.
- What could we do to move our company in this direction? Write down 101 items.

Keep score. You don't have to argue about what needs to be done. Just decide. And agree that the financial reports will tell you if you are on track. Good ideas and profitability are not mutually exclusive events.

At the end of the time out, you will all be in communication about where you are going with your company, how you are going to get there and who does what.

That's the goal. It's a big one.

So, take a time out. Make sure you are all on the same page. Make sure your business is working. I gave this advice to the woman in the first paragraph. It's yours for the taking, too. Let me know how your time out turns out.

Ellen Rohr is an author and business consultant who offers systems for getting focused and organized, making money and having fun in business. Her latest book is "The Bare Bones Biz Plan." She can be reached at ellen@barebonesbiz.com or via her Web site, www.barebonesbiz.com.