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## Small Business Builder: Employees in Crisis

### 'Butting In' Pays Off

**Second of 2 Parts**  
**By Mary Campbell**

**Oct. 24**

"It's none of my business," Ellen told herself when her assistant, Regina, seemed troubled. But with a little information and compassion, Ellen might have saved everyone a lot of grief.

Americans are reeling from a series of blows, including the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the flailing economy and the anthrax scare. We're frazzled, and we'll likely be more so as the holiday season approaches.

Already vulnerable, those with personal crises may feel utterly powerless & at risk for depression, susceptible to illness and impaired on the job.

Ellen was wrong. If nothing else, she had a right to question Regina's slipping job performance. More important, she was in a better position than anyone else to observe Regina's distress and help her explore solutions.

#### The Wrong Ultimatum

Ellen owned a small diner. For three years Regina had been Ellen's assistant. She did all the bookkeeping and marketing, with time left over to do market research and bake scrumptious berry pies.

Gradually Ellen realized that Regina had not only stopped baking, she made frequent bookkeeping errors and was falling behind. Ellen didn't tolerate employees' "gabbing," so no one knew why Regina was often ill.

Finally, Ellen confronted Regina. "We've all noticed that your work has been slipping," Ellen said abruptly. "If there's something wrong at work, I'll take care of it. If it's personal, I don't want to butt in. Just try to leave your problems at home. We'll talk in a week, after you've worked things out."

Regina responded by trying harder and accomplishing less. She would have been fired if Ellen's mother, in California, had not broken her hip and requested help. Entrusting the restaurant to her husband, Tom (a retired sales manager), Ellen gave him a sketchy account of Regina's ineffectiveness.

#### The Right Balance

Still, he was shocked to see how haggard Regina had become since he had last seen her. As a manager, every day he had chatted briefly with each employee. When he started the practice at the diner and greeted Regina, she barely spoke.

If Regina's difficulties had just begun, Tom would have waited a week or so □ two weeks at most □ before taking action. As it was, he took the first opportunity for a private conversation.

After making small talk for a few minutes, Tom got to the point. "Regina," he said, "I really appreciate how hard you're working, but I know you're struggling, and I'm concerned about your health. Is there some way we can help?"

Looking as if she were about to cry, Ellen asked if she were being fired. Tom was reassuring, stressing Ellen's excellent record and the importance of regaining her health. Pledging confidentiality, he encouraged her to talk but didn't press for details.

Soon Regina, between sobs, divulged that her husband, Steve, had stopped coming home after Regina learned of his infidelity and cocaine use. She couldn't sleep or eat, and she wept constantly.

When she paused for breath, Tom responded with empathy but refrained from blaming, diagnosing or giving advice, other than urging Regina to see her doctor. He had anticipated her response — she couldn't afford it — and gave her information about free clinics, the types of help available and the provisions of her group health insurance.

By closing time, Tom had helped Regina schedule a medical appointment and arranged for her to take a month off (paid through accrued leave). During her leave, he stayed in touch. Whenever she confided details about Steve, Tom always responded sympathetically ("How distressing for you!") and subtly changed the subject ("Your daughter's visit must be a comfort. Have you gone sightseeing?").

After four weeks of counseling, medication and a prescribed diet and exercise regimen, Regina returned to work half-time. Today, five years later, Regina is a happy divorcée and a partner in the thriving restaurant.

#### The Secret of His Success

Tom was effective because he was &

Alert. Tom saw beyond Regina's job performance, realizing she was ill and suspecting clinical depression (though he refrained from saying so and kept an open mind).

Prepared. As a manager, Tom received both training and experience working with troubled employees. He had established a basic but flexible procedure for such interventions.

Decisive. He acted quickly, knowing the situation would probably worsen.

Objective. Tom had to balance numerous concerns, including Regina's well-being, the bookkeeping and marketing, and other employees. He managed to be supportive without becoming entangled.

Trustworthy. Knowing Tom would check in, Regina faithfully kept her appointments. Without his follow-through, she might have given up. And she knew her secrets were safe.

Flexible. Tom gave Regina time to recover without damaging the business. And he wasted no time overturning the "no gabbing" rule. He had seen how destructive an employee's isolation could be.

An editor since the age of 6, when she returned a love letter with corrections marked in red, Mary Campbell founded Zero Gravity in 1984 to provide writing, editing, marketing and other services to small businesses. Her presentations and workshops address small-business topics from Web sites to business writing. An editor of and contributor to dozens of publications (books, journals and newsletters), she is co-author — with her sister, Pipi Campbell Peterson — of the second edition of *Ready, Set, Organize! A Workbook for the Organizationally Challenged* (JIST Publishing, 2001). Please e-mail her your comments, questions and suggestions at [whywalk@about.com](mailto:whywalk@about.com). Small Business Builder is published on Wednesdays.

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