

When the Student is Ready (Part I)

Harvey Penick was a legendary golf instructor and club pro who spent most of his career at Austin Country Club in Texas. From 1913, when he started there as a caddie, until the 1990's when he finally retired, he would serve up sage advice on the game of golf, and life in general, to people who would come from all over the country to see him.

Harvey distilled his golf wisdom into two books that I would recommend to anyone, even if you don't play golf: *Little Red Book* and *And If You Play Golf, You're My Friend*. In his second book, Harvey quotes an old saying about students and teachers: "The student must be ready for the teacher to appear." In other words, until a student is ready to learn, nobody can teach him. And as soon as he is ready to learn, he realizes teachers have been around him all the time...he just didn't see them.

Well, I've noticed a corollary to this student-teacher saying in small businesses.

It goes like this: the owner must be ready for the employee to appear.

Over and over again I see business owners struggle to find good people to fill their ranks. Their recruiting programs sometimes resemble a revolving door where one marginal employee after another comes and goes until finally one of them sticks. I hear them complain about not being able to find good people: "Nobody wants to work anymore." "I can't afford to pay the kind of money it takes to get good people."

But, I have found it's usually not an issue of money, unemployment rates, or anything else that holds them back from hiring really talented people as much as it is their own emotional readiness to *accept* highly talented people into their companies. Years ago when I first started working with small business owners, I noticed that older and more

mature companies seemed to attract better employees. Initially I thought this was due to the age of the company. Over time I came to realize it wasn't the age of the business as much as it was a reflection of the emotional maturity of the owner. The bottom line here is we attract the people we're mentally and emotionally ready to work with in our companies. It's the owner, not the employee, who needs to be ready.

A perfect example of this happened some time ago when I was discussing hiring a sales rep with one of my clients. During the last three years he had been through two salespeople. Naturally, he was a little gun shy about hiring another one because he felt he had failed with the first two. I mentioned to him that his experiences with the previous salespeople were typical for someone learning to manage salespeople. With each person he hired, his expectations were raised. So, just as he would never accept his first salesperson as a viable candidate now, he wouldn't have recognized the person he now wants when he was recruiting his first salesperson. In other words, he wasn't ready for this employee to appear.

Oh, sure, there are exceptions to every rule. There are the occasional owners who are lucky enough to attract one or two really good people early on who grow with their companies. If you're one of those people, count your blessings. But many times it doesn't work that way. Next week I'll explore some ways to help you identify your own readiness to attract top talent to your company.