

Support Staff:

The Backbone of Your Business



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The Key to Stability and Success

When business leaders think about what makes a company stable and successful, they often focus on the owner's vision, the leadership team's decisions, or the sales department's performance. But the reality is that none of those things function without a strong support staff behind them. Whether answering phones, managing logistics, or handling customer inquiries, support staff are the backbone of any business. Without them, even the best-laid business plans fall apart.

At American Fire Products, I've seen first-hand how the right people in the right positions create stability and success—and I've also seen what happens when the wrong people create chaos. Over the years, I've learned that hiring great support staff is only the beginning. To build a high-performing team, you also need to invest in training, teamwork, and long-term retention. When a company gets this right, customers can feel the difference.

So how do you find, train, unify, and retain out-

standing support staff? This article answers that question by exploring the key strategies that have helped my manufacturing company—and many hearth retailers—build a support team that fuels long-term success.

Hiring Your Support Staff

A great team starts with great people. But finding the right team members for your support staff isn't just about filling open positions; it's about hiring people who align with your company's culture and values. And the best employees aren't just skilled—they're also industrious, results-oriented, tenacious, and humble.

At American Fire Products, we learned this the hard way. Early on, we hired based on experience alone, assuming that technical skills were the most important factor. Over the years, we realized that the best support staff members aren't always those with the most impressive résumés; more often than not, they're the ones with the strongest work ethic. After all, these are the people who keep the business running smoothly, spot inefficiencies before they become major problems, and ensure customers have an excellent experience every time—and that takes a ton of hard work.

In addition to being industrious, the best support staff members are also results-oriented. They care about making things run smoothly and aren't afraid to engage in difficult conversations to make it happen. The easygoing nephew of your best friend might be great for another part of the company, but if he isn't focused on results, he isn't the right fit for your support team.

Last but not least, top support team members tend to have a rare combination of tenacity and humility. They don't give up when things get hard, they hold themselves and others accountable, and they actively seek ways to improve processes. But just as important, they have the humility to listen to the insights of others and own up to their mistakes. A person who is stubborn without humility will create unnecessary conflict, while a person who is humble without drive won't push hard enough to get results. The best members of a support staff possess both qualities—balancing tenacity with teachability.

Of course, finding the right people for your support staff is no small feat. But when you do, everything else—from training and teamwork to long-term retention—tends to fall into place.

Training Your Support Staff

Once you have the right people in place, the next step is training them well so they can perform at their best. A great support staff doesn't just "figure things out" as they go. They need clear expectations, structured training, and continuous development. That's why the best training programs focus on three critical elements: setting clear expectations from the start, providing ongoing learn-

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ing opportunities, and ensuring that owners and managers lead by example.

For starters, a great training program starts with clarity and consistency. As such, your support staff should know exactly what's expected of them, what success looks like, and how their role impacts the rest of the company. When people understand the "why" behind their work, they feel more engaged and motivated. That's why training isn't just about learning technical processes—it's about instilling a sense of ownership and purpose.

What's more, training should be an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Regular check-ins, performance feedback, and opportunities for skill development ensure that support teams continuously improve, not just maintain the status quo. Leaders should foster an environment where people feel comfortable asking questions, admitting when they need help, and learning from mistakes. When development is a priority, employees grow into their roles while becoming invaluable assets.

Last but not least, it's important to remember that

training is only effective when owners and managers lead by example. If company leaders expect employees to follow a process but don't follow it themselves, the entire system breaks down. The best training programs aren't just about procedures—they're about building a culture of accountability. And employees need to see that the same standards apply to everyone in the company, not just the new hires.

When training is done right, the support staff becomes more confident, reliable, and engaged in the company's success. And when every employee is fully equipped to succeed, the next step is getting them to work as a team.

Unifying Your Support Staff

Even with the right people in place and the best training available, support staff won't reach their full potential unless they function as a team. At American Fire Products, we learned early on that even the most talented employees struggle if they don't work together. Instead, silos form, miscommunication increases, and inefficiencies pile up. To mitigate these crippling issues and encourage genuine teamwork, your support staff must trust each other, communicate clearly, and work toward common goals.

Like any team, trust is the foundation of any strong support staff. Each member must follow through on commitments, step up when challenges arise, and hold others to a high standard. But trust doesn't come from perfection; it comes from honesty. Employees need to know it's okay to admit mistakes, ask for help, and learn from each other. When leaders foster an environment where people aren't afraid to acknowledge their struggles, teams become stronger, not weaker. On the other hand, when members of the support staff feel like they have to hide their struggles to appear competent, issues go unaddressed, and customers ultimately pay the price.

Of course, communication is the key to establishing trust and maintaining it over time. Team members should be able to clearly communicate—not just with customers, but with each other and other departments. When expectations are set upfront and information flows freely, inefficiencies decrease, problems are addressed, and collaboration becomes the norm.



BY EXAMPLE

Without strong communication, even the best employees will find themselves working in silos, struggling to stay aligned, and reacting to problems instead of preventing them.

Finally, great support teams don't just communicate well—they also work toward shared goals. The best teams don't just complete individual tasks; they understand how their work contributes to the company's success. Leaders must reinforce this constantly, showing employees that they're part of something bigger than themselves. When every team member is focused on a collective mission rather than just personal responsibilities, the entire company benefits.

When support staff work together as a unified team, everything improves—project efficiency, customer service, job satisfaction, and even the company's bottom line.

Retaining Your Support Staff

Hiring the right support staff, implementing an effective training plan, and fostering teamwork is hard enough—but keeping employees long-term might be the greatest challenge of all. As every business owner knows, high turnover in support staff positions creates inefficiencies, increases training costs, and negatively impacts customer service. That's why retention isn't just about keeping employees in their roles—it's about creating an environment where they feel valued, showing them how their contributions drive company-wide success, and painting a clear picture of future growth.

First and foremost, support staff need to feel valued, especially because they often operate in the background. Competitive pay and benefits matter, but they're only part of the equation. People want to know that their work makes a difference and plays a vital role in the company's success. Leaders can foster this feeling by encouraging employees to speak up, contribute ideas, and take ownership of their work. Employees must also know they won't be unfairly penalized for honest mistakes. When failure is treated as a learning opportunity rather than something to fear, team members gain the confidence to solve problems, take initiative, and improve continuously—rather than doing the bare minimum to avoid criticism.

Beyond individual recognition, support specialists need to see how their personal efforts contribute to a larger purpose. Simply put, people don't just want to be praised. Instead, they want to know that their work has *meaning*—that it positively impacts their teams, their companies, their communities, their country, and even their world. Leaders who celebrate milestones and directly connect employee efforts to company-wide wins create a culture of appreciation that builds loyalty, inspires growth, and provides purpose.

Lastly, employees need to see a future for themselves within the

Make training an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

Build a culture of accountability.

company. If they feel stuck in a dead-end role with no clear path forward, they'll start looking elsewhere. That's why it's critical for leaders to share growth opportunities—whether it's promotions, raises, or expanded responsibilities. When employees understand that today's hard work leads to tomorrow's opportunities, they're more likely to stay and invest in the company's long-term success.

The Foundation of a Thriving Business

In short, building a strong support staff isn't just an operational necessity—it's also the foundation of a thriving business. After all, having the right people in these roles enhances efficiency, elevates the customer experience, and creates the stability that allows a company to grow.

But hiring great employees is just the first step. Without proper training, even the best hires will struggle. Without teamwork, even the most skilled individuals will operate in silos. And without a clear path for growth, even the

most dedicated employees will eventually look elsewhere.

When a company commits to investing in its support staff by hiring carefully, training intentionally, fostering teamwork, and focusing on retention, the impact is undeniable. Daily operations run smoother, customers get better service, and employees genuinely want the company to win.

If you want to build a business that lasts, start with the people who keep it moving in the right direction. Evaluate your support staff, refine your training processes, and commit to developing a team that will grow with you. Because, in the end, success isn't just about having a vision—it's about having the right people to bring it to life.

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