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Stop Credit Card Abuse

Nothing in the competitive world of business is easy, but accomplishment usually results from knowing what you want to achieve and not giving up when inevitable obstacles get in the way.

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It's great that we no longer need to keep petty cash in an old coffee cup at the back of a desk drawer now that we can provide credit cards to spend the company's cash. But at the same time, we need to ensure that convenience isn't being abused. Here are five ways in which you can exert control, without being overly controlling.

Let all users know you review the incoming bills, scrutinizing them to see they meet the criteria for spending. At the same time, balance your scrutiny with the likelihood of losses; you can scale inspections up and down according to what you find each month.

Second, make everyone stick to the deadlines. One way to enforce that is to give greater scrutiny to those that come in late; in many organizations it's just the opposite, with latecomers getting the lightest checking because managers are in a hurry to finish the accounts.

Put the rules down on paper. You'll have fewer misunderstandings or fraudulent purchases if there's a written document that everyone reads and signs. And, be sure to spell out the details; for example, restaurant food can be put on the card, but not alcohol.

Fourth, spell out the penalties. When you create or update the card-usage document, specify that there are penalties and what those penalties will be. Be sure no one can come back to you later and say, "I didn't know...."

If you use corporate cards, make use of the filters provided by the card issuing company. For example, most cards can be registered with filters that prevent their use in places like salons and drugstores. Inappropriate purchases will be declined right at the point of sale.

As always, you'll walk a fine line between too little and too much control, but these five techniques will help you find a satisfactory middle ground. (**A Boss's Guide to Stopping Company Credit Card Abuse**, *The Motley Fool*, March 9, 2009)



"There's something we need to discuss...."

One of the toughest jobs we face as managers is one for which we don't get much training: Having those difficult conversations with employees.

Not the "You're fired, get out of here." kinds of conversations, but rather those dealing with seemingly minor issues such as inappropriate dress or bad hygiene. While the issues may seem minor, they often have an impact on many other employees and can be embarrassing for both you and the problem person. With that in mind, here are some tips for handling those conversations.

- 👑 Get permission to give the feedback. Ask if this is a good time for a serious discussion; if it's not, then ask for an acceptable time. By 'asking permission' like this, you're increasing the likelihood your feedback will be accepted and acted upon.
- 👑 Ease your way into the discussion. Give the person a chance to prepare himself or herself for the criticism. Again, be strategic: You want to get buy-in, and eventual change.
- 👑 If this is the result of complaints by other employees, keep that mostly to yourself, or at least be non-specific. This is your responsibility and your issue; saying you're reacting to the complaints of others will take the conversation in the wrong direction.
- 👑 Don't soft pedal the issues too much. Let the problem person know what the issue is, and how it could affect their success in the company. Unless the other person has a clear understanding of the problem, chances of meaningful change remain low.
- 👑 Outline the positive consequences the other person will achieve if they address the problem behaviour. In doing so, contrast the results between doing nothing and taking appropriate action.
- 👑 After the problem has been hashed out, set out some specifics. What will the other person do differently, when will they start (is there any reason they can't start tomorrow?), if the problem is complex what stages will there be, when will the full overhaul of the behaviour be complete?
- 👑 Review progress or lack of it. The reason you may be having this conversation is because of habits or ingrained attitudes. This means you should expect relapses, and be ready for them. Stay in touch, and routinely monitor progress.

None of these tips will eliminate the uncomfortable feelings that go with difficult conversations. But, along with practice and a strategic approach, they will help you manage these conversations effectively. That means you should receive fewer complaints from co-workers, provide a better working environment for everyone, and have an employee who contributes more to your success. (**How to Hold a Difficult Conversation: Providing Responsible Feedback Is Difficult**, *About.com*)

Focusing on the Right Financials

Every business with an accounting system can generate an infinite number of financial data points. So where should you focus your attention? Here are three essentials: Liquidity, Stability, and Validity.

Liquidity refers to readily available resources. You'll find that in calculations such as the current and receivables ratios. Stability measures your company's ability to meet unforeseen problems, including issues such as soft markets, bad debts, and so on. You measure this with data for working capital and access to funds from owners, lenders, and others. Validity refers to the accuracy of reported information. Are bank accounts reconciled and correct? Are accounts receivable and payable up to date and accurate? Along with the revenue, expense, and profit figures on the income sheet, these three sets of criteria will help you maintain a solid foundation, and a platform for the future. (**Managing your agency's financial information**, *Agent & Broker*, March 2009)

A Manageable Marketing Plan

Here's a seven-step plan for creating a simple, yet powerful marketing plan.

- 1) Narrow your focus, describing the ideal customer and what you do for her or him.
- 2) Position yourself by identifying what you do best, and in terms of what your ideal customers want.
- 3) Turn all your marketing materials into educational resources.
- 4) Forget cold calling. Instead, help your ideal customers learn.
- 5) Get media attention; build a list of journalists and build relationships with each of them by providing educational information.
- 6) Build a system for generating referrals from existing customers or clients.
- 7) After completing the previous six steps, create an annual marketing calendar, and break it down into monthly, weekly, and daily plans.

All told, these seven steps will provide you with a practical and effective plan for business growth. (**7 Steps to the Perfect Marketing Plan**, *Entrepreneur.com*, March 2009)

Electricity Without Wires?

Once upon a time, automobiles were called horseless carriages. Could the same thing be happening when we say, "wireless electricity"? Although the idea seems far-fetched, a number of researchers and companies have been doing it in the lab, and commercial applications are emerging, too.

Here's one example: Electricity is converted into radio waves, transmitted as far as 85 feet (so far), and then transformed into low-voltage direct current. With this technology, General Motors powers the 562 clocks at its Milford Proving Ground, eliminating the need to replace batteries. Another example: A small device that looks like a mouse pad allows the recharging of small devices like flashlights and cell phones, without wires. This magnetic resonating device is already commercially available. (**Wireless Electricity Is Here (Seriously)**, *Fast Company*, January 6, 2009)



Dear Friends,

Over the last year and a half our Sovereign team has been working hard to become your go to market for the specialized and complex insurance needs of your clients. During this time we have improved our underwriting capabilities through a comprehensive underwriting development program and through the acquisition of key talent across the country. As our regional teams have raised their game we have increased their authority, empowering your local Sovereign partners to find solutions to your clients' needs in the vast majority of situations.

To complement our regional capabilities we have created a Corporate Production unit. This team of underwriting specialists augments the knowledge and expertise of your local team allowing them to find solutions to some of your clients' most challenging needs.

Over the last several months our momentum has continued to grow. You have given us more opportunities to write your specialized and complex commercial accounts and we have found solutions for these needs with increasing frequency. In the first half of 2009 our core commercial lines have grown by a combined 6% despite the downturn in the global economy and persistent soft market conditions. Included in this package is a listing of some of the accounts and programs that we put on the books in May of this year. This list of "Wins" is produced monthly. It is available from your local Sovereign region management team. Please take a moment to review the listing. You may be surprised by some of what you see.

As we have broadened our capabilities over the last 18 months, our broker partners have consistently asked us to provide an outline of our appetite, to draw a box around what we can do. We have not and will not draw that box. There is a simple reason for this. Our starting point is the development of solutions to meet your clients' needs. Drawing the box limits our underwriters' ability to find the best solution. This is not to say that we will entertain every risk or quote on every submission. We will, however, look at each opportunity with an open mind. Our starting point is "how can we make this work" as opposed to "does it fit in the box".

If you have been challenging us with your complex commercial accounts ... thank you and keep them coming. If you have not thought of Sovereign as a market for these accounts, I would encourage you to give us a try. I know that you will be pleasantly surprised by what we can do.

Best Regards



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Do-It-Yourself HOME RENOVATIONS

By Angela Altass

It is not unusual for homeowners to tackle renovation projects themselves. With home renovation television shows, stores that promise to assist you along the way, as well as the many books and of course the Internet for guidance, it is tempting, especially in a tight economy, to lean towards doing a home repair or renovation yourself instead of hiring a contractor to do the job.

“Everyone has a different reason for wanting to renovate,” says the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) website www.cmhc.ca, which offers an abundance of information on home renovation projects, including a guide that is designed to take you from the project planning stage through to the final touches.

“A successful renovation can be a dream come true, but without careful planning and management, it can be a nightmare,” warns the CMHC website. “Be informed. Before you pick up a hammer, pick up a book or a video on home renovation, talk to friends and neighbours who have renovated. Explore all the options and remember the carpenter’s creed: measure twice, cut once. Mistakes on paper are easy to fix and inexpensive. Mistakes on the job are not. From the first idea to the finished project, there’s a great deal to think about when you decide to renovate. If you’re considering several projects, rank them in order of importance. Maintenance items should be given top priority. You’ll want to fix a leaky roof before refinishing the floor beneath it. Remember that building codes and local by-laws may also limit what and how you renovate. There’s nothing worse than discovering the project you’ve painstakingly planned is not allowed. Talk to your municipal building department and find out about zoning and permits.”

In most provinces, you are allowed to do your own home renovations as long as you get the necessary permits, follow local building codes and have the work inspected by the appropriate authorities, says the CMHC website.

“Doing it yourself can save money, but there are other costs to consider,” notes CMHC. “Are you prepared to draw up your own plans, get your own permits, and schedule inspections? How much time can you spend away from your regular job, your family, and other commitments? Can you be as efficient or as skilled as trades people who do this specialized work every day? You may feel comfortable painting a room or removing an old fence, but specialized tasks that involve wiring, plumbing or heating systems are usually best left to professionals. Some municipalities, in fact, require certain kinds of work to be done by certified trades people. There is also the question of equipment. If you don’t own the tools, you’ll have to buy or rent them. If you run into problems, who will you call? Renovation is a big responsibility, and at times it can be stressful.”

People who have decided to do a home renovation project themselves should take adequate precautions and wear any necessary protective clothing and use the proper tools for the job, says Phil Groff, Director of Research and Evaluation with SMARTRISK.

“If you are at home and you are renovating, the home has now become a workplace,” says Groff. “People who go to work in factories and industrial settings know to take necessary safety precautions on the job and yet when they get home they will go out and mow the lawn in a pair of flip flops. Whether you are at home or at work, a ladder is still a ladder and power tools are still power tools; the same precautions are required.”



The increased number of home improvement television shows, big box stores and cordless power tools have resulted in an increase in home improvement projects, notes the SMARTRISK website www.smartrisk.ca, which also notes a significant increase in the number of injuries among do-it-yourselfers, including finger amputations, eye injuries and broken limbs.

There are numerous ways of injuring yourself while doing work at home. Many of the tools used for home improvement are potentially hazardous, especially when being operated by inexperienced users who aren't being safety conscious. Power saws, ladders and nail guns are common causes of home improvement injuries.

While home improvement shows offer some great ideas, it is important to remember that the hosts are professionals and that they know how to safely use the equipment, and, while they may not always mention it, they are always mindful of safety concerns while working.

"A recent study from the U.S. found that almost half of all finger amputations among men 55 and older are caused by power tools," says SMARTRISK. "The increased availability of inexpensive power tools means that tasks that used to take effort and consideration, like sawing wood or driving a nail, can now be done in a second. This increased the risk of injury significantly because there's no warning of an impending injury. Each day in Ontario, more than 65 people visit an emergency department and almost every day one person is hospitalized due to a tool-related injury."

Bryan Baeumler, host of HGTV's Disaster DIY, says he has seen a bit of everything when it comes to do-it-yourselfers. Disaster DIY is a show about do-it-yourselfers who have failed at their own home renovations and are in desperate need of some on the job training. Baeumler arrives to teach the DIYer how to fix his or her own mess by showing them their mistakes and teaching the safe and proper way to do the job. Baeumler also operates his own construction company, Baeumler Quality Construction.

"We show the homeowner how to avoid the problem in the future and help them do it correctly," notes Baeumler, "we don't just go in and just do the work for them."

Education is a key factor for success, says Baeumler.

"People should educate themselves on the different methods for doing the job at hand," he says.

"Figure out how much money you have to spend and come up with a reasonable and workable schedule. There are often many different ways to do a particular project properly. Pick one method and research it. There are some things that we recommend people do not do themselves. Some people think because it is their home they can do whatever they want, but for some things, such as electrical, plumbing and structural work, it is best to bring in a licensed technician. In these areas, a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing."

Although the Internet can be a good source of information, Baeumler reminds do-it-yourselfers that information from an online do-it-yourself forum is coming from an anonymous unproven source.

Asking questions and research information can save a lot of money and stress as one mistake can compound into a bigger problem, says Baeumler who encourages first time do-it-yourselfers to start small, such as buying paint and painting a wall before tackling a big project.

Proper clothing is required when taking on a renovation project, which means no flip-flops or shorts and putting on the hard hats, gloves, masks and safety goggles, notes Baeumler.

If the job involves removing plaster or drywall from an older home, Baeumler suggests sending a sample to a lab for testing to verify there is no asbestos.

On the website www.hgtv.ca, Baeumler advises renovators to clean up regularly.

"Renovation is a war on dirt," he says. "A lot of people expect thousands of pounds of lath and plaster to come down without creating a mess. Cleaning up regularly makes it easier to see what you're doing and it's safer. When it comes to laying drop sheets, try taping up plastic sheets to keep dust down. An ounce of prevention is worth its weight in gold."

Abby Buford, Public Relations, Lowe's Companies, Inc. suggests that those considering a do-it-yourself project take some time to ask themselves the following questions:

- Do I have the skills and knowledge to undertake this project? Discuss the project with people familiar with your DIY skill level and ask for their opinions.
- Do I have the proper tools or can I rent them at a reasonable rate? Don't make things hard on yourself by trying to improvise with improper tools. Professionals use the correct tool for the job to achieve professional results.

- Can I complete this project safely? Safety is always the first concern in any project. Familiarize yourself with all aspects of the project and the safety precautions. Older homes may contain hazardous materials. If your home has lead-based paint or asbestos, hire professionals to deal with these hazardous materials. Familiarize yourself with all the necessary power tools and read the owner's manual before operating. If the project requires a ladder, use it in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- Do I have the time to complete the project? Remodeling projects usually take longer than expected. Estimate how long the project should take and then add 30-40 per cent. The extra time accounts for a learning curve and gives you an opportunity to increase your proficiency in the task.
- Can I complete this project by myself? If not, is there someone available to help out? Many projects require at least two people. If you need a helper, try to work with the same person throughout the project because you'll get familiarity with each other's work techniques and you won't need to re-train someone to help you in the middle of a project.
- Am I confident that I can do a quality job? Completing a quality project not only improves your home, but also gives you a sense of pride and accomplishment. Likewise, a poor job can actually detract from the home's value and appearance.
- Do I have the stamina to complete the project? Remodeling is hard work. Lifting heavy or awkward objects, constantly going up and down ladders and contorting your body into tight spaces requires a fit person.
- If the project requires permits, can I obtain them on my own? Certain aspects of a project may require building permits. Call your local building authority to find out exactly what permits are required and how to obtain them. The building authority can also tell you which aspects of the project require a licensed professional.
- Do I have the patience to do the job right? When progress seems slow, the temptation to rush through a project mounts and the chance of ending up with a sloppy job increases. Maintain your focus and resist the urge to plow

through the job. Take a day off occasionally to recharge your batteries.

- Do I really want to do this project myself? The desire to do the work yourself will carry you a long way. That desire can help you overcome many obstacles and drive you to obtain new skills and knowledge.

"If you answered no to three or more of these questions, seriously consider hiring a contractor," says Buford.

Safety: do-it-yourself

Bookstore shelves across the land are stacked each month with shiny, lavish home décor magazines busting with project ideas and examples for the do-it-yourself renovator. It's no wonder Canadians continue to eagerly embrace the need to stamp their own style on their living spaces – indoors and out. And while it's certainly healthy to create a comfortable space that suits your life, make sure you build safety into all your plans.

Bring it home with you

For many people, safety is a foremost consideration when on-the-job, but don't forget to be equally diligent at home. Before you launch into your next home décor adventure make sure you prepare with safety in mind:

- Plan your project tasks beforehand. Check for "How To" seminars through your local home and garden or building centres, or check their websites for tips.
- Know what tools and equipment you'll need and check that everything is in good working order.
- Take your time. Rushing causes accidents.
- Use safety glasses and earplugs to protect yourself.
- Keep gloves and clothing away from moving parts of machinery.
- Power saw blades have protective guards. Make sure the guards are in good working condition. Saw blades should come to a full stop before you set the saw down or move the stock on a table saw.



- Don't press too hard against a drill when you are using it. The bit could break or slip and you could be injured.
- Don't use a screwdriver as a chisel. The steel tips are not as hard, and the metal may splinter or break and become a flying missile.
- When using outdoor electrical tools, you should have a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) outlet for protection.
- Have others stay well away from your work area while you are operating power tools.
- Most shop injuries are caused by careless use of the common hammer. Gently tap a nail to get it started, and then move your fingers out of the way before driving the nail to the finish. Make sure there is enough room to swing the hammer without accidentally hitting another object. Hammers have been known to bounce off objects, striking the user in the head or elsewhere.
- Keep your work space area tidy. Trips and falls can occur easily when cords and equipment are strewn about.

Nail gun control

One particular tool that is causing hospital visits for some DIY renovators is the pneumatic nail gun. According to a 2007 report from the U. S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the number of consumers seeking emergency treatment for nail gun injuries increased 200 per cent from 1991 to 2005. The report explains 13,400 consumers were injured in 2005 by nail guns and 96 per cent of those were men. The most common injuries affected the upper body, and included puncture wounds, bone fractures and eye injuries.

Safety-conscious consumers should ensure any nail gun equipment that is part of their tool shed has a safety feature called a sequential-trip trigger.

Nail guns should always be used carefully, according to the operating instructions, and eye protection should always be worn while handling these powerful tools. Professional sales staff can also offer advice on using nail guns and other tools safely.

Moving on up

While ladders may not be as high-tech as some other home improvement gadgets, they are the largest tool in the home and often a part of our renovation jobs. We pull them out for every paint and wallpaper project, to wash windows, or clean the gutters. We also tend to use them improperly.

According to statistics from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), the autumn season accounts for the highest number of emergency room visits due to ladder injuries. Across North America, more than 300 people a year die from ladder-related falls and injuries.

Ladder Safety Tips

- Use a ladder of proper length to reach the working height you need.
- Wear slip-resistant shoes and ensure your hands and feet are dry before climbing.
- Before you use a single, extension or stepladder outside, make sure it will not hit electrical wires or tree limbs when extended.
- Place the feet of the ladder on firm, even ground.
- The bottom of the ladder should be about one foot away from the wall for every four feet that the ladder rises.
- The upper and lower sections of an extension ladder should overlap to provide stability.
- Face the ladder while climbing and stay in the centre of the rails.
- Do not lean over the side of the ladder. Your belt buckle should not be further than the side rail.
- On single or extension ladders, never stand above the third rung from the top and never climb above the point where the ladder touches the wall or vertical support.
- If you have to push or place a lot of pressure when using a wrench, think about what can happen if the wrench should slip. Busted knuckles will heal, but a fall from a ladder could be fatal.

So when you put together this weekend's do-it-yourself list, put safety at the top.

By taking your time and being fully mindful of how you are using tools and equipment, you can ensure renovation project success; hopefully, the end result is the home of your dreams?

Visit these websites for more information:

www.hgtv.com/

www.home-improvement-and-financing.com/home-renovation-safety.html

<http://www.healthyonario.com/Home.htm>

http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/dispPage.jsp?cw_page=media_08nov2006_e

(Source: *Wellness Report, Manulife Financial Group*)

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