



## MANAGING **Everyone's a Critic**

Including your employees. Here's how to listen—really listen—without losing your cool

NOTHING USED to annoy Christine White more than a complaint from an employee. The owner of Boudoir Baskets, a Web-based retailer of lingerie and other romantic accouterments in Santa Clara, Calif., was convinced that no one knew her business the way she did. Even as her company grew to 20 employees and White relinquished more of the day-to-day responsibilities to focus on larger, strategic matters, she had a hard time accepting that her sales reps might possess greater insight into her products and customers than she did. ....

In fact, the faster you react to criticism, the more likely you are to react inappropriately, says Kim Kanaga, director of the Greensboro, N.C., campus of the Center for Creative Leadership. "The best thing you can say is, 'That's interesting, let me think about that,'" he says. Indeed, reactions like crossed arms, glares, and sighs will betray you, adds Ted Sun, president of Executive Balance, an executive development firm in Columbus, Ohio. People place great weight on such "nonverbal" information, and a bad reaction to criticism sends the message that you really do not care what your people think—a direct ticket to groupthink city.

West, for her part, ultimately decided that her employees had a valid point on at least one count—the company's "no-excuses" absentee policy during client projects. Two weeks later, West came back and asked employees to help design a more flexible policy. "They were shocked that I actually remembered, much less took the time to think about it," she says. And what if West had decided that her employees' feedback wasn't worth pursuing? That's okay too—simply letting employees know that you've considered what they have to say is enough to make them feel safe about speaking up. In fact, that's one of the great things about being the boss: Just because you've asked for feedback doesn't mean you have to follow it.

Alison Stein Wellner