

Where Do You Draw the Line?



The topic of a lively discussion held during the Dealer Section meeting at the recent WQA Mid-Year Conference stuck with me long after the meeting adjourned. The subject of conversation was how to identify and address employee theft in your business, and every dealer in attendance had real-life examples to share.

Now I'll admit that going into the meeting I thought the discussion would be about employees who steal water-softening systems or perhaps dabble in embezzlement, but it turns out I wasn't thinking simple enough. In reality, anything from running errands with a company vehicle to making personal photocopies at work can be considered employee theft.

And while many dealers might not fire an employee for making a few phone calls or photocopies on the company's dime, you do have to draw the line at some point. If all of your employees give away an extra bag of salt here or there, that will add up throughout the course of a week...and you essentially are the one who will pick up the tab.

So how do you keep your employees from selling a bag of salt without a receipt and then pocketing the money? Or how do you keep your employees from bringing their tools home with them or stealing parts to do work around their house? I would almost guarantee that incidents such as these occur in nearly every dealership—and this could certainly hurt your bottom line in the long run either through losses or escalating misbehavior.

Many of the problems that dealers face in terms of employee theft stem from trust and too much of it. As an owner or manager of a water dealership, you need to establish firm policies that are well known to all of your employees. You should also maintain strict inventory procedures, and if you think you are having any problems whatsoever, refine your procedures.

Do your employees take their vehicles home at night? If so, perhaps you should develop a mileage-tracking program because people are more likely to run personal errands on their way home from work, which can add miles to the vehicle and eat up more of your gasoline. And with gas prices pushing \$4.50 per gal, that too can add up.

Some dealers have installed security cameras in their offices and warehouses and were amazed by what they saw. Other dealers immediately fire employees who lie to them. This establishes precedence and demonstrates the value of honesty to all employees.

You should also lead by example and demonstrate that you, too, value company property and time. If your employees are not allowed to bring their trucks home with them at night, then neither should you. If your employees are given a half-hour for lunch, then you should take the same. Your employees are more likely to develop a work behavior similar to that of your own so always be asking yourself, 'Where do I draw the line?'

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