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How one banker's faith saved a small business

When I think back over the last 20 years or so, I think about the time we almost closed our doors. It was a time when the business environment was so stagnant that companies all around us were closing or being closed. Local banks were having it tough too and many of them were being taken over by larger institutions. That's what set the stage for that day.

As I sat in my office, listening to my bookkeeper "dialing for dollars" from clients who were also having a tough time keeping up with bills (including ours), I got a call. It was from Kevin Flaherty, a banker whose institution held our line of credit. It turns out that my tiny line of credit was an anomaly in his department. They normally dealt with much larger businesses. Because the bank was considering a merger, they were taking a good hard look at the books. My line of credit simply needed to be cleaned up. Not right away. I'd have until Monday. Somehow I just didn't quite have that \$15,000 in the drawer that I could send him by Monday. Somehow.

So, I came in on Saturday to think about how I was going to close the business. I thought about how I'd tell my employees. And my parents. And all the people who looked to me as the small business owner who'd made it. I looked around the office. At the impressive stories we'd placed for our clients. At the wonderful sales materials and logos we'd pulled out of our creative minds. At the collection of awards that told us our peers thought we were worthy of

praise. I thought about how I started the business with the goal of creating the best workplace I'd ever worked. I knew I'd created that. The empty halls rang with the laughter we indulged in every day; with the creative juices that fueled our work and with the teamwork that kept us looking forward to coming to work every day.

I decided I wasn't willing to give that up. I knew I'd never find another workplace as good as this company. I decided to fight. Or,

more accurately, to give up on fighting.

First thing Monday morning I called Kevin. "I don't have \$15,000. Do what you have to," I told him. There was silence and then he said, "Hmm, well, that's disappointing. I'll have to get back to you. Maybe we can put you in our Small Business Department." "Okay," I mumbled, shocked that the

Bank Police hadn't swooped down to take me to the Bad Business Poor House on the spot.

Two days went by and then another call from Kevin. "They don't want you," he told me, making me feel even lower. Rejected. Too much in the hole for even the Small Business Department to want us. "What happens now," I asked. "I'm not sure," said Kevin, "I'll have to get back to you."

Well, two days later he did get back to me, with a miraculous offer to pay off the debt over time. In a business environment where banks were shutting businesses' doors for much less, Kevin took a leap of faith and believed in my firm. He threw us the lifeline we needed and changed the

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"Remembrance"

By Andrea Obston



course of our firm's history with that one act of confidence in us.

Fifty-three months later, I walked into that bank to personally hand them my last monthly payment. Kevin had since moved on to another institution.

Nevertheless, I made an appointment with two bankers who were quite mystified by my need to personally bring in the last payment. I told them I had to. I told them that their institution took an enormous flyer on my company and that I needed to tell someone that face-to-face.

When I placed the check on their desk, there was a moment of silence. All three of us stared at it. Finally, Anonymous Banker #1 spoke: "Hmm, well, thanks. Is there anything else we can do for you?" And feeling quite smug I answered, "You can validate my parking."

And I floated out of that bank, knowing that nothing and no one was ever going to shake my belief in my business like that again.

Oh, and I should add one more thing: I did see Kevin again. He sat at my table when the then-Hartford Chamber of Commerce awarded my company the Small Business Leader of the Year award in 1998.

And we're still here. We celebrated our 30th anniversary on Nov. 15. Thank you, Kevin. ■

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