

## BUSINESS

# BBB staff finds harmony with Itsy-bitsy tail-wagger

Last fall, the Better Business Bureau received a written complaint about me, about a management decision. That is a bit unusual – in fact, rare. I'm not sure it ever occurred before. But I need to tell you what led to this event.

When BBB Vice President Elea Sprinkle approached me about a puppy she wanted to buy, she told me this puppy was going to be so small it would need to be fed every two hours. I'm still not really sure what breed it is. Elea wanted my permission to bring the pup into the BBB office until it weighed 6 pounds and could stay home during the day. My first response was no, this is not a dog day care center. Then she e-mailed me a picture of the pup. Oh, heck, what could a couple of weeks of puppy sitting hurt? I relented.

"Itsy" arrived and the entire staff fell in love. Here was this tiny (itsy, bitsy) blond puppy with sad eyes and a wet nose. However, being a hardened executive, I was not taken in and kept reminding everyone that this was temporary, and not to get too attached.

But a strange thing happened on the way to 6 pounds. I started observing what that little bit of fur did to the staff. Each morning Elea and Itsy would come in, Itsy would make the rounds. She went to each cubicle, each office, and stood on her back legs, waved her front



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paws and made little happy sounds. Sort of a good morning "high five" for everyone.

Many of the calls we make and take here are not pleasant, and morale is a constant focus for everyone. Somehow, Itsy knew that. When a staff person ended a particularly rough call, Itsy was there to be petted, do the Itsy-wave or just to sit close by.

We have all heard the tales (or tails) of dogs and cats in health care centers offering comfort and support, and this was a clear example of that kind of relationship. All the tension that builds up in your neck, between your shoulder blades and in your clenched teeth seems to melt away when an animal looks up at you, just adoring, not judging. Even I understood that and knew sending Itsy home was going to be hard on everyone.

There were a couple events that sealed Itsy's fate. The first was the complaint. Yes, the one about me. The BBB board chairman, Dan Austin with Austin's Jewelry, spent some extended time in our office talking with the staff while compiling my performance evaluation. I am adamant that my board talk with my staff as part of my evaluation. When he finished, we received an anonymous written complaint about my plan to banish Itsy. We all knew Dan left the complaint, for he had seen the Itsy Effect in action, too.

But the final straw was Itsy's relationship with my no-nonsense investigator. Zan Deery is a tough, direct fact-finder and not a dog person. Her job is probably one of the most



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stressful and unpopular in the office. She was really keeping Itsy at arm's length, but that did not deter that little dog. Zan's office became her favorite spot, her nap place and the place we all looked first when it was time to find Itsy.

Then Zan started to talk to Itsy. She brought her treats and socks and toys, and the bond was solidified. More important, Zan

softened and relaxed with that little dog, and with the rest of us, too. Itsy made it OK for Zan to let her guard down – a difficult thing in her position, but that 6-pound dog got it done.

The Zan-Itsy connection is so strong that one day when Zan was sick, Itsy just sat at the door to her office looking lost. I think they need each other and the BBB needs Itsy. Yes, it took me a bit of time to understand the Itsy Effect, but now I get it. And the BBB is not the only office with a dog.

Itsy has a job here at the BBB. She is our Twitter mascot and has quite the following. The CEO of Zappo's! Shoes is one of her fans. She sends out Twitter messages about BBB tips, news releases and thoughts in general. Her personality is all over these messages; just a fun way to help people make good buying decisions. If you want to follow Itsy, go to [bbb.org](http://bbb.org), type in your ZIP code, then click on her picture. Sometimes she runs all the way to Bozeman or Yakima for a juicy tidbit.

So Itsy is a permanent addition to the BBB these days, and for the future. I was wrong and completely underestimated the effects of animals on people under stress. She is an important part of our message, our culture and our caring for each other and the communities we serve. Lesson learned.

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