

Business leader speaks out about employee theft

Freddie Wehbe, who had an employee steal from him, wants to help other owners avoid the same fate.

By [Karen Voyles](#)

Freddie Wehbe stood up in front of a room full of business leaders Thursday, opened his mouth and spoke the words that are taboo in most business circles.

"An employee stole from me," Wehbe said. "It is embarrassing, but I felt I had a duty to open this up to talk about."

Wehbe is a nationally recognized businessman who owns eight Domino's Pizza franchises that are collectively known as Gator Domino's, has been named the national Domino's manager of the year and had received multiple franchise of the year awards.

Wehbe spoke to more than 100 people gathered for a Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce lunch meeting Thursday in the hope it would prevent other business owners from being similarly victimized. Wehbe estimated his businesses lost more than \$10,000 a year ago when one employee began manipulating how pizzas were accounted for and paid for.

Wehbe said that once he started researching employee theft, he realized he was far from alone in being targeted.

The FBI has identified employee theft as the fastest growing crime in America. The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners has determined that seven percent of a business' gross sales revenue is lost to internal theft or shrinkage and the average organization loses more than \$9 a day per employee because of fraud and abuse. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, nearly a third of all business failures are directly related to employee theft.

Once Wehbe realized that he had a problem, he said he began to view employee theft as "the enemy within," and he looked for help to avoid becoming a victim again. Now Wehbe conducts background checks on employees, requires drug testing and he hired an auditor.

Wehbe also uses the crime prevention experts that have long been available - the financial crime investigators at the Alachua County Sheriff's Office and Gainesville Police Department.

Several of the investigators joined Wehbe at the chamber luncheon to share employee theft cases they had investigated, offer tips on how to avoid becoming a victim of employee theft, and remind business owners that both agencies offer free security surveys that are exempt from public disclosures.

Alachua County Deputy Leo Lowe's message to chamber members was that employee theft requires three things - desire, ability and opportunity. Lowe said that business owners cannot control their employees' desires or abilities, but can control opportunity by installing - and using - security cameras, adding physical security such as locks on storage areas and making it appear difficult to steal.

Officer Ernest Graham addressed another aspect of theft deterrence - employees.

"Trust your employees, but don't trust them to be honest," said Graham, who then added his list of three key factors in deciding who to hire. "Background check. Background check. Background check."

Even employers whose longtime employees have become friends are not immune to employee theft problems, said sheriff's Detective Randy Enos.

He recounted the plumbing company owned by a couple who employed a friend as a bookkeeper for 13 years. The owners then discovered the bookkeeper they thought was a friend had stolen \$150,000 from them, Enos said.

"They relied on friendship, but you can't do that," Enos said. "This is your livelihood. Don't let someone take it away from you."

Once you put safeguards in effect, like security cameras and auditing, review them often," said police Detective Sgt. Greg Armagost.

Armagost explained how a coffee shop owner installed a camera directly over a cash register and still had employees skimming from the till.

Sheriff's spokesman Lt. Steve Maynard urged chamber members to have oversight of all aspects of their businesses.

"No one employee is too big or too trusted not to have oversight," Maynard said. "Oversight means you are a good leader because it leads to accountability."