

Engaging and Empowering Employees During Troubled Times

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With many companies cutting back their workforce or enforcing hiring freezes, employees are left trying to do the same or more work with fewer people.

That's when employees begin asking themselves key questions: What happened? Are we next? Should I start looking for another job? How am I going to do my job plus take on additional responsibilities?

All those questions lead to anxiety and fear, draining the positive energy and motivation from the organization and employees. So what can leaders and managers do to re-energize their workforce and maintain high levels of productivity?



Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

During unsettled times, it is more important than ever to communicate with employees, including:

- A clear articulation of the present and future vision of the organization.
- An outline of how the company plans to reach this new strategic direction, particularly if the direction has changed due to the down economy.
- An outline of how the organization will redefine itself so it can survive the downturn.
- A simple explanation of the financials and the rationale behind any needed restructuring that is taking place.
- A clear distinction of how each employee's roles and responsibilities add to the overall success of the organization.

Employees appreciate being in the know, and want to contribute to improvements and future success. Once they understand why the company is doing the things it is doing, anxieties are channeled into increased productivity and creativity.

Valuing Individual Contributions

Ensure every employee understands how their individual efforts contribute to the strategy and direction of the organization. It is important that every employee has a sense of pride and commitment in their work. That means understanding the difference their individual efforts make in the overall productivity and profitability of the organization.

Train Them

Training is critical to ensure that employees are productive and effective, particularly if they have new assignments. Individuals will need product, operational and skills training.

Leaders and managers often forget that one of the biggest motivators for individuals is continuous learning and growth. Training is truly the new 401(k). Offering employees the opportunity to learn new skills builds their commitment to the organization and increases their productivity. When companies invest in employee training, the employees become increasingly loyal and committed to the organization.

Leadership management training is also important for supervisors and managers. Many have never had to lead or manage during such challenging business times. They need guidance, direction and back-to-basics

management skills on how to coach, motivate, recognize effort and reward the results of their employees. With business pressures escalating every day, leaders and managers need to be reminded of good management techniques.

Ask and Listen

Employees want to see their organization succeed, and many have excellent ideas to save money, enhance various operations, and streamline processes. This is a time when it is especially important to ask employees the following:

- What are the strengths of the organization?
- What are the areas of development for the organization?
- What types of things should the organization stop doing?
- What do you, as individuals, personally need to improve your efficiency and productivity?
- If you could give one message to the senior staff, what would it be?

Asking for and listening to employee input reduces fear, helps employees feel valued, and can reveal innovative and creative ideas that the management team may not have considered. And while it is great to ask and listen, action must be taken that leads to the next strategy.

Engage Employees in Solving Business Issues

Once issues are identified, engage a team to develop solutions. When people are engaged and active in a process that is focused on business success, they stop worrying about restructuring and layoffs. People love to see they are personally making a difference and contributing directly to the company's success. Improved efficiency and effectiveness are the results.

These teams will need structure, which can be achieved by having them position their thinking around the following:

- What is the present state of affairs for the business issue they have been assigned to resolve?
- What is the ideal state?
- How should the organization move from the present state to the ideal state?
- How long will it take to achieve the ideal results?
- What will be the cost associated with the recommendations?

In many cases, small immediate changes can and will be made, and this process of engagement and empowerment adds pride, commitment and energy to the organization.

Maintain Customer Satisfaction

Make sure all customers are well taken care of throughout the downturn. As it costs 10 times more to acquire a new customer than it does to support existing customers, companies cannot jeopardize customer satisfaction levels.

Customer relationship skills must be at optimum levels. Ensuring employees have great relationship-building skills helps create instant rapport with customers, improving customer satisfaction levels. As an additional benefit, these skills allow co-workers to effectively communicate with one another during stressful times.

Recognize and Praise Employees

During unsettled times, employees take on additional responsibilities and, in many cases, go the extra mile. It is particularly important in these down times for managers to recognize effort and be sure praise is overflowing. A simple "thank you," "great job," or "I really appreciate your extra efforts," are meaningful things that people want to hear. This will build incredible loyalty and commitment, and encourage people to work even harder.

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