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Maintaining Morale When the Landscape Looks Bleak

Here's how to build employee morale during tough economic times.

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People can't find gas to get to work, and when they find it, the price is alarming. On the way to the office, they hear doom and gloom about the economy, with news of bailouts, bank failures and plummeting stock values. And, when they get there, rumors are flying about what's going on in their own company.

As a manager or business owner, you've still got a company to run and revenues to generate. In order to succeed, you need calm, stable, productive employees. With everything looking so grim, how do you build or even improve employee morale during tough economic times?

Be consistently (and even brutally) honest.

Your integrity is the most important component of keeping your employees focused and positive. Now is not the time to sugarcoat the situation, and people can see through a lack of authenticity in a heartbeat. Employees want to feel like insiders, even when the news is bad. Explain what is happening. Explain the particular challenges the company or industry is facing. Do some scenario visioning with your people, examining and discussing worst-case scenarios, best-case scenarios, and most likely scenarios. Many times discussing the issues can allow people to get their anxieties out in the open and relieve some of the tension.



If layoffs are definitely on the horizon, let people know when and where the possibility exists. Morale will certainly go in the tank when people feel as though they are walking through a minefield every day they come to work. As Jack and Suzy Welch observe in *Business Week*, managers who choke on bad news often leave employees twisting in the wind for weeks or months before the ax falls. A member of a focus group once said this to me: "We're grownups. We can take bad news if someone gives it to us straight." Just don't keep employees in the dark.

Have a plan. Gerald Graham, in the *Wichita Business Journal*, says employees want to see a way out of the pain, and they look to leadership to provide a path. Let people know the actions you are taking to turn things around, including freezing certain spending or pay increases. On the other hand, many companies immediately shut down training and employee development when times get tough-not always a good idea. Let people know that you are trying to help supply them with the tools to be more competent and productive.

Hold people accountable. Now is not the time to go easy on people and overlook their mistakes. And, as a former IT executive notes, "don't attempt to alleviate the situation with "fun events." Set priorities and make your expectations clear as you work to improve the situation. Maintain timely and consistent performance feedback and provide coaching to improve productivity and efficiency. Help people see specifically how their jobs are critical to getting things back on track.

Engage your employees in finding solutions. Your employees really are your most important assets, and the collective IQ can be a powerful force in solving problems. Encourage employee suggestions, conduct focus groups, and ask individuals for their opinions and ideas. Listen carefully, and act when the suggestions make sense. Seeing their proposals become reality will energize people and spark more good plans.

Above all, you need to maintain a positive attitude that sets an example for your employees. That doesn't mean looking at the situation through rose-colored glasses. Certainly, you need a tight grip on reality, but at the same time, your demeanor can send a message that says things will get better. You and your employees can emerge from a crisis stronger and more committed to each other while positioning the company for a genuine recovery.

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