

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Leading your team through an economic boom is one thing – after all, rising profits and regular bonuses do wonders for staff morale. But it's during a downturn that managers really have to show their mettle. **Paul Sweetman** explains how to get the best out of your team when times are tough

If you believe what you read in the papers, the storm clouds of recession are gathering overhead – indeed, given the tone of many media reports, you could be forgiven for wanting to dive under your desk and wait for the bad times to blow over. In the midst of such economic uncertainty, it can be very tempting for managers to keep their heads down and leave their employees to get on with the day-to-day running of an organisation rather than looking for new ways to deal with an increasingly pressured environment.

In reality, however, the passive approach is never more dangerous than in troubled times. When the going gets tough, it's more vital than ever to engage with your employees to ensure they deliver the strategy you need to pull through. It is in such circumstances that good leadership comes to the fore – inspire your staff, and you can re-invigorate a troubled team and strengthen their commitment to a common purpose. Get it wrong, however, and you risk upping your staff's anxiety levels, causing confusion and distracting

them from 'business as usual'.

It's an oft-quoted truth that employees at all levels take their cues from above and study after study has shown that we are influenced most by the people who oversee our work, set our objectives and manage our performance. And if managers are role models when the sun is shining, the same applies when a cold front blows in. The way managers act, respond and communicate will help quell – or, conversely, exacerbate – the uncertainty their staff are inevitably feeling as the financial forecasts grow ever more pessimistic.

In these circumstances, employee engagement takes centre stage more than ever. As a manager, every action sends a signal to the people around you – hiding behind a closed office door and avoiding interaction can easily be misinterpreted by an unsettled workforce. You may not mean anything by it – indeed you might regard a more serious approach as a positive response to adverse conditions – but your colleagues will be all too ready to form their own opinions about what is going on.

When times are hard, and whether you see yourself as a good ►

As share prices tumble, it's down to leaders to keep staff motivated

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“IN TROUBLED TIMES, IT'S VITAL TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR STAFF TO ENSURE THEY DELIVER THE STRATEGY YOU NEED TO PULL THROUGH”

communicator or not, reinvigorating your efforts becomes paramount if you want to bring the workforce along with you. Enhance your visibility, make sure you hold those team briefings you have been postponing lately, take the time to walk the floor – even use your blog to send out a clear message about where the business is going. You could even consider question and answer sessions over a sandwich or even a topic-based ‘surgery’, where employees could book a time to discuss any concerns they may have. All these techniques will help to keep your staff onboard.

However, it's important not to over-compensate in difficult circumstances. Totally revolutionising the way you interact with colleagues can also send out the wrong message – suddenly altering your natural style can engender concern and even suspicion among your coworkers. Rather, you should aim to make incremental steps, which, instead of threatening your employees, will actually bring them with you.

If you are called away from the office, or are responsible for several sites, make use of technology to reduce the distance between you and your staff. As part of a co-ordinated engagement plan, tools such as intranet presentations, webcasts and audio Q&A can galvanise teams and reassure them that you are in touch and, more importantly, in control. Never let distance be a barrier to more effective communication, especially at a time when employees need to feel engaged.

TELL THE TRUTH

Be aware that effective engagement doesn't simply mean spouting comforting words for the sake of it – your workforce will grow increasingly cynical if you pretend everything is going swimmingly while it is obvious that the business is actually in the teeth of a recession. Rather, making honest dialogue the cornerstone of a stronger working relationship will help steer the organisation through tough times.

No team will expect you to know

everything about the market conditions affecting the organisation, nor to have a total grasp of the latest economic developments. And never feel pressured to speculate on the impact of a set of circumstances – this is a short-cut to over-promising, which can be far more damaging to the employer-employee relationship in the long run. It is easy to reassure people that everything is going to be OK, but this can be counter-productive if the situation turns out to be worse than you thought. Instead, stick to communicating the facts and keeping employees up-to-date as best you can. Provide regular feedback along the way – this will strengthen the trust and confidence that your staff have in you.

Establishing openness is the best

Keep the communication lines open: being visible to staff inspires confidence in your leadership

way to enhance employee involvement. No matter how good a manager you are, you are unlikely to have all the answers, and asking employees their views can help to strengthen common purpose and identify steps the organisation can take to improve the situation. Even a small idea can have a big effect and added together such initiatives can make a major difference. Creating an ‘open mic’ spot in team meetings, setting up a feedback mailbox or developing a more formal ideas scheme can all help to steer an organisation through choppy waters.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, tough times require tough decisions, and you may have no option but to reduce headcount. Letting employees go is one of the

biggest tests for any manager and the way you treat people, both those on the way out and the ones left behind, will act as a barometer of your credibility. Communication must be clear, open and couched in a business context – it's vital that you reassure staff that decisions have been taken for economic reasons and for the future health of the company and that you treat those affected with honesty, integrity and respect. In this way, you can start to direct attention away from a painful but necessary business decision and provide people with the information and support they need.

For those who remain in the organisation, redundancies can be unsettling – there's the inevitable sense that while they may have kept their jobs for the moment, they could

be next on the list. However, if those leaving are seen to be treated well, then the staff who remain are more likely to stay committed rather than confused. The key is to make sure you operate with the human touch – treat people with respect and sensitivity, and explain that difficult decisions have been necessary because of the economic circumstances.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

When the spectre of recession looms and livelihoods are threatened, employees use their manager as a filter through which they gauge the gravity of the situation and its potential impact. In such circumstances, there's a real need for managers to effectively engage with employees to minimise the impact of

Right: Redundancies might be necessary and the way you handle them will reflect on your credibility
Below: Technology can help to reduce the distance between you and your staff



uncertainty on commitment and productivity. Do it well, and you can strengthen relationships with your team, which will not only help you to navigate the storm, but also prepare you for future challenges. Get it wrong, however, and you risk losing credibility in the eyes of your staff, which can have a major impact on their confidence. Whatever you do, don't leave it to chance – the economic picture may be pretty gloomy, but communicating effectively with your staff may make the difference between boom and bust. ■

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