

Managing During Difficult Times

By Steve Frigand



During a downturn, it's important to identify core values and processes for survival, according to consultant Steve Frigand. Photograph by Kathleen Dooher

insecurity. So how do we help our organizations make it through this downturn and come out stronger and more capable than before? Comedian Steve Martin might suggest we take things less seriously, for example, by slipping a slice of bologna into each shoe before heading out to work. Although adding lunch meat to your wardrobe is impractical, the underlying idea is valid: it's critically important that we shift our attitude from one of fear and powerlessness to one of dealing more lightly and proactively with our situation.

Don't just paste on a "smiley face"

As leaders, we often assume that our thoughts about negative topics such as downturns should remain private, hidden from employees and coworkers. We mistakenly believe we can go about "business as usual." But our colleagues and family members notice shifts in our mood and behavior, often before we're aware of them ourselves. Our attitude affects others whether we want it to or not, and it's important that we take responsibility for that impact.

It can be helpful to hold a group meeting to acknowledge shifts in the economy and address the resulting impact on the organization and individuals. We can encourage team members to share what pressures and distractions might be reducing their productivity. Depending on levels of trust, this information might be shared anonymously, through individual meetings, or in a group setting.

Let people know they're not alone

Following a layoff, employees remaining in an organization often feel overwhelmed as they try to perform their own jobs, the work of those laid off, and duties imposed by new austerity measures all

During an economic downturn employees experience anxiety around a number of issues. These may include:

- Potential job loss and reduced income
- Depletion of savings and investments
- Inability to handle new demands created by work force reductions
- Increased competition within the organization for fewer resources, with less willingness on the part of groups to support each other
- Impact of work issues on family members
- Unpredictability about how long and deep the downturn will be

The mere act of identifying these factors can raise feelings of discomfort and

while missing their excolleagues and fearing that they might be next. They may wrongly believe they're the only ones in the enterprise who feel that way. Such a belief can actually increase stress levels, reduce productivity, and leave the employee feeling less secure. But sharing such feelings in a group setting can not only mitigate their impact, but also lead to action plans for addressing key workplace challenges.

Seize the opportunity to review priorities

A slowdown is actually a good time to reconfirm your organization's purpose and vision. Determine which core values and processes will help you through the downturn. Suspend or eliminate initiatives that, although "nice to do," will not improve your position once the economy is back on track. And take advantage of this time to retool and "sharpen your saws" in order to realize greater capability during the next boom.

- Be a positive role model.
- Model the behavior you want employees to exhibit and encourage stress reduction techniques to enhance group effectiveness.
- Resist the temptation to "declare martial law." Engage others respectfully and avoid the overuse of positional power.
- Work reasonable hours. We're not really productive and we don't make sound decisions when we work 18-hour days.
- Be open and direct with employees about what's going on in the organization and provide explanations for important decisions.
- Don't sacrifice integrity for desperation. You may never be able to rebuild your reputation with your group.
- Recognize others for achieving key results, honoring organizational values, and taking courageous and appropriate risks.

The economic downturn needn't paralyze your enterprise with fear and anxiety. Rather, it can be an opportunity to harness the realigned power of your organization.

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