

Ahead of the CURVE



Your weekly installment of tips and ideas for success

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TAPPI Weekly SURVEY

How much do current economic conditions affect morale around your company?

- Not much – business is good, so we stay happy.
- A bit – but management works to keep morale up in tough times.
- A lot – it really is getting tougher out there, and we're tired.
- Too much – Help! We've fallen and can't get up!

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2007 ENGINEERING PULPING AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONFERENCE

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■ You've fallen...and don't know how to get up

by Monica Wofford

To survive the downturns, you need to know what your team needs to keep going.



Leslie paid attention to the trends in the market. At one time she could almost stand on the side of the road with a sign that said "For Sale" and make her quota. But things had changed and she, as well as others in her industry, now needed to work much harder and much longer to make even the smallest sale. In fact, it seemed that many industries were feeling this trend and the morale, attitude, and action of employees all over was reflecting the apparent down economy.

Everywhere she went people complained; sellers were fearful of trying to sell; buyers were fearful of making a big buy; and employees were hearing it from consumers daily. Yet, as was the case in Leslie's office, all upper management focused on was the numbers. There was nothing being done about the extra hours she had to put in or the extra follow through she had to do, or the downright struggle she faced in psyching herself up to come to work another day.

The truth is that our economy has shifted. It has gone back to "normal," some would say. Others claim the GDP is still rising and job placements are up--both good things. But when your staff feels the crunch and believes that things ARE bad, what will the impact on your organization be? An employee who feels her job is on the line may give up caring about what your business looks like. Employees surrounded by negative customers or rejection day in and day out may begin to believe what they hear and pass it on, accurately or otherwise.

The time is now to help those who feel they have fallen. Change the morale from "it's all going down" to "we can turn things around." Your efforts don't need to rhyme, but they may be the most important thing you do to save your company, your department and your employees from making a mad dash to the door for greener pastures. If you feel your team has fallen... and doesn't know how to get up, try these steps:

Rally the troops

Much of what is begun as grapevine fodder in organizations is a function of miscommunication. One look or one memo can create an avalanche of attitude issues that require serious damage control. Rally the troops and openly discuss what is going on with your business. What are the trends? What is affecting your business economically? Why are you changing a product line or lowering or raising prices? If they are a part of the process and have all the information they need to know, employees are much less likely to create their own answers to keep from feeling in the dark.

Refocus training

Part of what helps an organization is training to keep up with the new skills needed and new advancements made. However, training is a \$51 billion industry, and much of what organizations offer is not what will fix the problem.

For example, time management training will not help employees overcome the fear of continued rejection, which may be the real reason they are not meeting their cold calling quota. A refocused training plan that begins with a complete analysis of where the

problems lie may incur a slightly higher investment up front, but will leave you with lasting results far after the downtimes have gone.

Get to know who they really are

A key problem-causing element is that, when people are under stress (such as when the media tells us the economy is going bad) people will reach for and use traits and behaviors that they don't usually use. If an employee shows an attitude problem when the stress is high and change is frequent, but not when times are good, it is possible that merely raising awareness will alleviate the problem. In fact, one profile tool and 90 minutes in our business have been known to clear up days and hours of work in what could have become a huge HR issue. The awareness of what an employee does under stress will help you and that employee to be more rational and productive, at *all* times.

Bring in an outside source

If you have children, then you have seen what happens when they ask you a question. You are just the parent and cannot possibly have any validity. Yet if the neighbor or a complete stranger provides the same answer, they seem to have real insight!

The same is true in your organization. The voices of the familiar faces lose their value over time, and when an outside source comes in and shares similar information in a different way, their credibility is automatically greater. Bring in a consultant, an advisor, or a trainer that you trust to diagnose and deliver a solution to the problems that you are facing in these times.

Re-motivate middle management

No one seems to suffer more than those in the middle of any situation. Middle management, when times are tough, gets it from senior levels in asking for more numbers and better results. But, they also get it from the employee level in complaints, attrition, or personal issues that prevent performance. Give some thought to the middle managers in your ranks who could use a few kudos, a touch of team spirit, and a little pat on the back for being the "glue" that seems to hold it all together.

Whether you believe times to be tough or just fine, the perception of those you work with is the reality they face every day. What you do in the downtimes shows character, strength and conviction. It is easy to be happy and upbeat when things are good, but who are you when the chips are down? How many people do you help to "pick up" in the process? They say when you make it through the tough stuff that it builds character, but you actually have to *make it through* it to see all the new character you'll now have.

About the Author

Monica Wofford brings more than 17 years of experience as a business consultant, trainer, and speaker to Monica Wofford International, Inc. Her Orlando-based training firm provides one-on-one coaching, profile assessments and consulting on training problems to many Fortune 1000 companies. When asked what she does she often says "I save companies approximately \$2-5 million dollars in employee attrition costs over about six months." If that is what you need, contact Monica personally at www.monicawofford.com or in her office at (866) 382-0121.

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