



FEATURES

- Administration
- Garments
- Industry Counsel
- Marketing
- Marketing Mayhem
- Safety
- Sales

DEPARTMENTS

- Archives
- Association
- Calendar
- Corporate Update
- Directors
- Industry News
- Last Page
- Officers
- UTSA Staff
- Vendor Update



IL FEATURE

## Know how to fall so you can get back up

By Monica Wofford

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. Things were no longer that way and she, as well as others in her industry, were now having 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, upper management focused only on the numbers. Nothing was being done about the extra hours she had 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 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 starts to feel the crunch and believe that things are bad, what do you think the impact on your organization will be?

Employees who feel their job is on the line may give up caring what your business looks like. If surrounded by negative customers or rejection, day in and day out, they may begin to believe all they hear and pass it on, accurately or otherwise.

The time is now to help those who feel they have fallen to get up. Change the morale from "It's all going down" to "We can turn things around." Your efforts don't have to rhyme, but they may be the most important thing you do to save your company or department and your prevent 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:

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**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 damage control and attitude issues. 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 your people are part of the process and have all the information they need, they are much less likely to create their own answers to keep from feeling in the dark.

**Refocus training.** Training helps an organization obtain needed new skills and recognize advancements in how the industry operates. However, training is a \$51-billion dollar industry and much of what you may offer will not 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 quotas.

It may require a high investment up front, but a refocused training plan (which begins with a complete analysis of where problems lie) will leave you with lasting results far after the downtimes have gone.

**Get to know who they really are.** Under stress, when the media tells us the economy is going bad, people will reach for and use traits and behaviors to which they do not normally turn. This can cause problems.

However, if an employee shows an attitude problem when stress is high and change is frequent, but not when times are good, mere raised awareness could alleviate the problem. In fact, in our business, one profile tool (requires 90 minutes) has been known to clear up days and hours of work and avoid creating a huge HR issue. Awareness of what an employee does under stress will help you and that employee become rational and productive, at all times.

**Bring in an outside source.** If you have children, you know what happens when they ask you a question. They may want an answer, but they see you as just the parent, and your answer cannot possibly have any validity. However, if a neighbor or complete stranger provides the same answer, to your children, this outside, unfamiliar party seems to have real insight! The same is true in your organization. The voices of 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, advisor, or trainer that you trust to diagnose and deliver a solution to the problems you face 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 pressure from senior levels to produce more numbers and better results. 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 little kudos, a little team spirit, and a little pat on the back for frankly 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 and strength and conviction of your beliefs. 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, you build character.

That's great, but if you want to make it through, you'd better start building now.

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