

Keeping Employees Motivated in Turbulent Times

by Ed Rigsbee, CSP

As a business owner or manager, you are currently dealing with two crucial issues for the success of your business. First, you are dealing with the current economic slowdown and the possible magnification of that slowdown resulting from the September 11, 2001 attack on America. Second, you are dealing with the fears and anxieties of your employees – both about the well-being of America and the security of their own jobs.

To put their feelings in perspective, perhaps you might think back on a difficult financial time of your business, a time when even meeting the payroll was in question. Somehow you survived. Your business today is living proof of your survival instincts. Think back on the enormously high level of anxiety you experienced. Resulting from September 11, many of your employees are experiencing those same kinds of anxiety levels in both the areas of national security as well as job security. Everybody has some feelings of helplessness. We all want to do something to help our country, and in a way that will create value for others – not just doing for the sake of doing.

Many people, and not just in urban environments, are also truly questioning their safety and security. A recent Wall Street Journal article on workers' needs in cataclysmic times quotes David Stum of Aon Corp.'s Loyalty Institute as saying, "Bosses who ignore or rebuff basic needs will see employee commitment and output fall."

Not all people deal with stress, sorrow and anxiety in the same way. Some are more resilient than others. To help you understand levels of resilience in people, I recommend that you read Linda Nash's fabulous book, *The Bounce Back Quotient*.

Nash suggests that you help your employees, as well as yourself, to take control of what you can in this turbulent time. She believes that to the extent you take control you will reduce your stress and powerless feelings. Nash says you can't control what happened – you can't fix it – you can't turn back the clock. "Your world has changed without asking your permission," states Nash. She continues, "Begin to take action – small is OK. Send a card, listen to someone who is grieving, take him/her food, hold a hand, give blood, attend a religious service, bake some cookies, volunteer, or assist in any way you can. Process your emotions but don't allow them to take control. Do something!"

Nash warns employers not to expect to go full speed back to normal. She says, "You may feel unusually tired or listless. Do what you can to regain your balance and take on usual tasks. Eat properly, take a walk, visit friends, get enough sleep, go to work and begin focusing your thoughts elsewhere." Call her at 800-701-9782.

For the people who tend to be more emotional, they express their feelings. But for people who keep their feelings bottled up inside – daily, they could be teetering on the breaking point. The key message in this article is: To keep your valued employees, it is crucial that you help them in the way THEY need help rather than how YOU think they need help. Please stop now and cement this idea in your head. Acting on this understanding is what will make the difference between high and low productivity in these difficult times.

It would also be helpful for you to have an understanding of the heritage, generational and historical culture of your employees. If you are a middle age Anglo and all of your employees are middle age

Anglos from the same small town, that is one thing, but more likely there will be a generational and cultural mix. There is never a one size fits all solution for people of different heritage and generations, yet sometimes there can be some general solutions that will help many.

For example, Carlos Conejo, author of *Motivating Hispanic Employees*, says that in times of stress, Hispanic employees need to be more involved in decision-making and problem solving. He suggests that you open more widely your channels of communication with your Hispanic employees. Call Carlos at 805-494-0378.

John Alston, CSP, CPAE, is a distinguished and much respected motivational speaker. He helps people to rejuvenate themselves through a newfound awareness of their own potential. He is also an African-American. He suggests that in turbulent times you help all your employees to grow as they are trying to deal with anxiety. He believes this will motivate employees to continue working for their employer. Alston also suggests that you should be crystal clear on the mission of your organization. In turbulent times, Alston suggests that things are happening so quickly that what worked last week might not work this week.

Alston says that for African-American employees, especially in turbulent times, you need to be clear on how they operate and what they see as valuable. Help them to build camaraderie in the workplace and reward their performance. Call John at 800-200-9225. On the topic of rewarding your employees, see my article titled "Praise for a Job Well Done" at <http://www.rigsbee.com/ma9.htm>. In the article, I offer ideas on 50 no-cost and low-cost employee recognitions.

Corporate psychologist Dr. Barton Goldsmith suggests that to help your employees in turbulent times, you must understand the grieving process. He says, "After a significant crisis, every person and every company needs an adjustment period. Companies that don't make room for this psychological necessity find it more difficult to move ahead. Encourage and support your people to recognize and experience the loss, even if it's the loss that comes from giving up the "we've always done it that way" syndrome.

Grief includes five key stages (denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance) that may come in any order except for acceptance, which is always the final stage. Guide you family and your team through the process, giving them room for their feelings to be expressed. Make sure to do the same for yourself. Call Barton toll free at 866-522-7866.

I recommend that you pay close attention to the six employee need areas listed below. Please understand that not all your employees will need attention in all areas. Some might not need any attention at all while some could need attention in several of the listed areas. Your role in helping your employees is to keep your eyes open to their special needs. It might also be helpful for your employees if you could communicate your willingness to help. Perhaps a memo or posted notice stating that you are available to help them in this difficult time would make it easier for them to approach you about their needs.

Employees Who Need Support

Some people, in turbulent times, need a bit of a crutch on which to lean. You, as an employer, very well may be that support mechanism. In times when people need this shoring up of their fortitude and morale, they could also need additional guidance. President George W. Bush, during his September 20th address to the joint members of Congress, provided America with both an emotional and moral compass. You as an employer can make a big difference in the lives of your employees by providing, on a daily basis, the same emotional and moral compass.

Employees Who Need to Reassess Their Priorities

A good number of people are taking a closer look at their lives and how they have selected their

priorities. It is common, following a critical event in one's life to reassess. You can help your employees by being open to the changes they select. You may find it necessary to allow some people who have been deeply affected to transfer into a new position or set of responsibilities. Be open to the possibilities.

Employees Who Need New Challenges

Some employees may feel a need to share in the leadership role. This might help them to have some sense of control in their lives. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Harvard University conducted several employee productivity studies at Western Electric's Hawthorne Works. At that time they concluded that people were more productive when they had some control over their work environment – the same is true today. Perhaps an employee could head a new project, take the lead in learning a new technology, or even participate in management meetings representing the rank and file employees. Donnelly Corporation of Holland, MI has had great success worldwide for several years with the idea of employee representation.

Employees Who Need Guidance and Mentoring

Most people, sometime in their careers, need some guidance and/or mentoring. Living through tragedy can amplify this need. As perhaps you are, your employees, especially GenXers, are in the process of sorting things out – emotions, feelings, priorities and other issues. This is the time for you to shine. Help your employees by sharing your successes and failures. Show them the path to productivity. If you help them so well that they want to start their own business, become their partner. I watched Bruce Scott, owner of a burglar alarm company build his network using this method. I also watched him net a fortune for him and his partners when the business was sold.

Employees Who Need a Cheerleader

Cheerleading, at all times and especially now, is a crucial element in successful leadership. Periodically, everybody needs to be told how valuable he or she is to an organization. Some need this reinforcement more often than others. In turbulent times, it is so important to show your pride in your employees. Perhaps now is a good time to push their creativity buttons and cultivate their star power. Give your employees the opportunity and tools to amaze you. Many just need a bit of direction and a pat on the back and they're off making things happen. And when they do amaze you, acknowledge and reward their accomplishments.

Employees Who Need to Be Left Alone

While I realize that it might be difficult to understand that some people need to be left alone to deal with issues in their own way without assistance or guidance, it is true that some do better this way. Their behavior might manifest as something that resembles work avoidance or hide and seek behavior. Be sensitive to their issues, and if you must involve yourself, this is the time to use the carrot rather than the stick.

The important key in dealing with your employees and helping them get through and keeping them motivated during these turbulent times is to focus on what THEY need and how THEY need it, rather than imposing YOUR cultural, generational and empirical experience on them. Stepping back and viewing a situation through a new window can, at times, be difficult for even the most caring employers. Yet, it is what you have to do.

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