

How to Motivate Workers in Tough Times

Recent economic developments have made some mid-level managers feel as though they have to "trim sails" to help the company stay on course. But there's no need to be Captain Bligh. This Wall Street Journal article is aimed at helping companies maintain productivity and profitability, without cracking the whip, even as the economy dives. But it applies equally well to safety. Because if you can't get workers motivated to work safely, they'll get hurt. And if they get hurt, your company loses profitability anyway.

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How to Motivate Workers in Tough Times
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How do you keep employees focused, motivated and energetic when everything's lousy? It's tough. We checked in with Jim Harter, who studies workers' commitment to their jobs -- or "employee engagement" -- at Gallup, the research and consulting firm. He's also co-author of "12: The Elements of Great Managing." He shared his advice for managers. Here are edited excerpts:

Is it harder to keep employees focused and motivated during bad times?

Organizations have to put more attention into it. They have to communicate more. [Managers] have to put more focus into setting expectations, making sure people know what they're supposed to do.

Why is employee engagement important during bad times?



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It helps people be resilient. Businesses right now, when the economy's bad like this, they're trying to survive. And to survive you've got to have some psychological resilience. You've got to have employees who are positive despite the negative situations around them.

So what do managers need to do now to keep employees motivated and focused?

Great managers are good at connecting people to each other and knowing that when people come to work, their need to have friendships doesn't go away. Great managers get to know the people pretty well, [so if an employee] lost a friend due to layoffs, the worker doesn't necessarily feel like they've lost every connection they have in the workplace.

What else should managers do?

During tough economic times, you're doing more with less. So you've got to understand each employee individually. If you've just lost a couple people from a work team due to layoffs, you might have to reposition people a bit. It's very difficult to do that unless you're in tune with what the strengths are of the people on your team.

Often overlooked is just clarity of expectations -- setting expectations. Only a little over half the people in the workforces that we've surveyed over the years clearly know what's expected of them in their job. That becomes more important in an economic crisis, when you could be managing fewer people, so communication and ongoing expectations-setting based on how the roles change for people -- that's important.

[Also, managers should be] helping people know how they're a part of the future. So they're not just thinking about an economic crisis [and] being fatalistic, but that it also might present some opportunity. And that this isn't necessarily something that's going to last forever.

What are the biggest mistakes managers make during tough times that hurt engagement?

When you become increasingly hard-grinding, trying to get more out of people with less, and if you do it in a way where you're criticizing people, that will work against you. It'll tighten people up and stress them out. The great managers know how important it is to build relationships all the time and have fun at work.

Managers feel the pressure. When you're under pressure, the instinct is to tighten up and to think you have to run it militaristically, but you don't.

What other mistakes do managers tend to make now?

Sometimes they can forget about giving recognition. When times are tough, it's easier to think about correcting weaknesses than to think about recognizing people when they're doing great. I would argue recognition is even more important in times like this. They're going to hear more negatives just naturally through the course of the day, and if you can't get recognition at work, where are you going to get it?

Plus, recognition is cheap and it's not like people will be getting hefty raises this year.

That's right. It doesn't cost anything, it's a basic human need and it makes people do productive things.