



How to Keep Employee Spirits Up When the Bottom-Line is Down

Shattered faith in an organization's leadership is one of the first and most damaging outcomes of a business crisis. Employees expect their leaders to be awake at the helm.

By Mac McIntire

When a business faces economic uncertainty, the reactions and behaviors of its employees in response to the crisis tend to be extremely predictable.

Panic in a Crisis

As the business starts to take on water and flounder in the troubled competitive seas, the crew often panics. Instead of rallying in a unified effort to save the ship, it becomes "every man for himself". The rats hurriedly scurry to get off the ship before it goes under. Talented and well-trained crewmen lose their nerve and bearing, abandoning the core strategies and skills that could keep them and the ship alive if they would just stay focused.

In a crisis those who don't know how to swim tend to frantically and irrationally bark out orders in a weak attempt to veil their fear of drowning. Instead of plugging leaks or reinforcing the ship, some leaders throw crewmembers overboard as if sacrificing staff will appease the profit-eating nemesis.

As would-be rescuers arrive on the scene they find amidst the frothy dark waters of the turbulent market the flotsam of broken business promises, unattained goals, decreased quality and service, low morale, poor performance, and hopeless despair. If the business has not already sunk, the damage caused by the competitive battering leaves scars that will take months of careful skilled maintenance to repair.

What troubles workers the most during and after economic storms is the frontal assault on

their assumption or hope that the captain of the ship was alert at the helm when storm clouds first loomed on the horizon. Shattered faith in an organization's leadership is one of the first and most damaging outcomes of a business crisis.

Employees expect their leaders to be awake at the helm. They expect management to monitor the competitive environment and anticipate the low and high pressure systems that signal potential disasters. They trust, when storm clouds arise, the officers of the organization will alter the company's strategic course to steer the company to less trouble waters. When unforeseen difficulties confront the business, they expect their leaders to confidently take charge of the crew, calmly ordering the corrective actions necessary to right the ship.

How to Keep Spirits Up

During a crisis the officers of an enterprise must keep their heads about them so they can steady the crew. They need to see clearly both the dangers and the opportunities facing them. As a leadership group, they must be a unified core whose actions are well-thought-out and coordinated to move the organization forward.

During difficult times people need to stay focused, or refocus if the current strategies are ineffective or no longer appropriate. This is the time to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. It requires clear, creative thinking to lessen the weaknesses and threats and to take advantage of the stre-

ngths and opportunities in order to drive value to the business. It is a time to rediscover the fundamentals of the business — the critical success factors that will keep the ship afloat and return it to a safe harbor.

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