

GOOD TIMES OR BAD TIMES: COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR TROOPS

We're in a recession. We're not in a recession. Data suggest that we Americans aren't quite sure what to believe at this stage of the game. Businesses, too, struggle with how much company information should be shared with employees for fear of inciting panic within those who find comfort in having a job to go to each day.

These uncertain times require a sensitivity on all our parts. Business leaders, in particular, must continually look for ways to ease workers' minds with respect to company facts and future growth projections. Unfortunately, some executives believe that withholding information is the best tack to take in order to reassure employees that the company is alive and well. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Now more than ever employees are desperately needing open channels of communication to foster trust. One's worst enemy often exists in one's mind and develops as a by-product of a lack of information. Employees need information. Good, bad, or otherwise, now is the time to let people in on the state of the organization and not leave hardworking individuals to wonder daily about their collective fates.

Whether it's a year or two from now, this so-called "recession/non-recession" will continue to evaporate. In the meantime smart company leaders must not only look for high levels of production from their employees but must also give to these same employees some peace of mind concerning their jobs. Even if the news isn't good, it's better than no news at all. Waiting for the diagnosis is harder than dealing with the diagnosis.

Good communication is the key. When employees are fearful, they tend to speculate. Often this speculation is based on worst-case scenarios and "what if" possibilities. If employees can see the company has a plan to improve its bottom line and that this plan involves more than job elimination, they come to feel a part of the bigger picture.

People want to be involved. They need to be involved. Calling company or departmental meetings on a regular basis to keep employees informed of decisions that impact employees' lives can be a good thing. However, limiting these meetings to large groups of individuals can be a mistake. Why not call people aside on an informal basis and find out what their personal struggles are? Why not offer spontaneous words of gratitude with respect to excellent job performance? The small gestures are noticed as much, if not more, than the big ones. Keep people involved!

I'm not suggesting that proprietary information be revealed to individuals at all levels of the company. Employees know that lines of hierarchy exist. They don't usually expect their superiors to share anything and everything concerning sensitive company information. What I am suggesting, however, is that business leaders continue to get real and share both the good and the bad.

Today good business leaders have an opportunity to lead in ways that instill loyalty in others by respecting the intelligence and needs of their colleagues. Employees are human beings first and workers second. As long as companies continue to protect their most precious asset, their workforce, planning for the economic upturn will be an easier task.

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