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Engaging employees post-recession: It starts with good leadership

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Layoffs, hiring freezes, increased responsibilities, reduced or flat pay, lack of bonuses, reduction in learning and development opportunities and fewer perks. Ah, the joys of being a survivor in an organization. But hey, they're just happy to have a job, right? Well, yes, temporarily.

“It seems that all the psychological turmoil experienced by employees during the economic downturn has caused a collective decrease in faith in the company”

-Lisa K. Tesvich Ph.D



But what happens when the economy improves? A November 2009 study by **Right Management** found that 60 percent of employees intend to leave their current positions when the economy improves and an additional one-quarter are networking and updating their resumes. Their collective feet stomping out the door will serve as a sounding alarm of pent up frustration. And guess who will likely be first out the door. Yep you guessed it; that would be your high performers. The **2009/2010 U.S. Strategic Rewards Survey by Towers Watson and WorldatWork** found that employee-engagement levels for all workers at the surveyed companies dropped nine percent since last year - but the number was nearly 25 percent for top performers. It seems that all the psychological turmoil experienced by employees during the economic downturn has

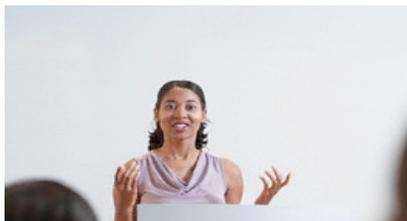
caused a collective decrease in faith in the company, especially for high performers. But what do you do, especially when we're still in a time of economic uncertainty? You start re-engaging them, now. And here's how:

Re-energize your leaders

Many organizations forget that leaders are people too! Most leaders in organizations have also gone through psychological trauma and suffered a decrease in their own morale. Making and executing difficult layoff decisions, doing more with less, increased pressures and demands and higher expectations will affect even the most seasoned of leaders. Many of them are uncertain and anxious about the organization, its direction and its market viability. They may have differing opinions on how the organization should proceed. Their behavior may become self-serving and destructive to their team and employees. Spending time working with this group to ensure shared vision and commitment is an absolute imperative. The rest of the organization is watching this group carefully for signals as to what the company's future will be like and whether or not they want to be a part of it.

Share a clear and compelling vision

If you don't have one that meets the above criteria, get one. And I don't mean one that sounds like the Gettysburg address and takes a half-day to explain to people. Every leader in the organization should be able to share this vision without accompanying slides. If your leaders don't truly get the vision and can't state it simply and confidently, there will almost certainly be confusion amongst everyone else. Confusion breeds anxiety



and uncertainty. Employees, especially high performers, need to see exactly where the leadership is going. Provide them information on plans to reposition the company in next 18-24 months. Help them believe that the company that they are a part of is a winner or a potential winner in the marketplace. At a minimum people will be well informed. At an ultimate, they will be energized, excited and mobilized to positive action for the company.



Clearly define roles and responsibilities

A [Gallup Q12 survey](#) of employee engagement from July 2008 to March 2009 found that the question with the most significant drop was "I know what is expected of me at work." With layoffs, restructuring and changes in direction, many employees have experienced significant role shifts with little clarity about their new role. These employees need to be given specific information regarding what is expected. In addition, leadership must delineate the linkage between the goals of the organization and how the work of the individual helps the organization achieve those goals. Every individual, from the engineer, the salesperson, the executive assistant, needs to know why and how what they do leads to the success or failure of the company. They want to know they make a difference.

Openly, honestly and frequently communicate

This is always a necessity but in times of uncertainty it becomes even more important. Employers often delay in communicating because they don't know everything or because they don't want to communicate what may be unwelcome news. But this is always a problem. In the absence of honest communication, employees feel anxious, gossip with others, "make up" what they believe will happen and pass it through the rumor mill. Not much productive work gets done. Employers need to communicate what is known at any given time and what is not known. This is particularly true for high performers. They need to know where the company is going and how they fit into those plans. Be truthful but remain positive in your communications. Fear is not a good long-term motivator. And just because you told them once doesn't mean they got it. Communication must be ongoing.

Educate and involve employees in solutions

If you've been to Costco, a wholesale retailer, you may have noticed a sign in the parking lot that says, "Help us keep your costs down by returning carts here." This is their way of educating consumers on how they contribute to keeping their own costs down. So guess what? Most people return their carts. This is a very simple illustration of how powerful it is to let people know how small, everyday activities contribute to a company's bottom line. Yet, most employees have no idea how their company makes money. Educating employees on how the company makes and loses money and its products and strategies for competing in the market place will help employees understand their own effect. Collaborate with them on ways to help the company. They will not only have numerous ideas on how to make things run more efficiently but they will also feel greater ownership in the solutions.

Align your HR management systems with the direction and goals of the organization

All too often, critical talent management systems are producing sub-par results. These tools used throughout the life cycle of the employee are so powerful and yet so often not achieving near their potential. Even talent management systems that at first glance appear to be in alignment with the company's goals and objectives may be flawed. Consider a company whose objective is to enter new markets through offering different products. They will need to innovate, and innovation requires risk taking. Their talent management system aligns with the company's objective because they recruit and select employees who demonstrate this competency, provide learning and development opportunities that foster innovation, provide feedback related to innovation and reward people who successfully innovate. A closer look, however, reveals that people are punished in their performance reviews and pocketbooks for taking risks that don't end well. Lesson learned by employees: play it safe, don't take risks. Now, how innovative do you think an organization will be when employees won't risk doing anything different? A CEO can talk to employees all day about the importance of innovation for the future but, at the end of the day, behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated. This misalignment will significantly hinder the organization of reaching its goal of increasing market share.

Treat employees well

According to the [Russell Investment Group](#), using stock market performance data, companies that make the Fortune "100 Best Places to Work" list over various periods of time, consistently outperform major stock indices. Demonstrating integrity, being fair and showing respect for employees while fostering a sense of camaraderie is indicative of the companies that would make this list. In addition, especially in today's times, it's important to recognize that employees don't leave their lives at the door when they show up for work. Some may be struggling with a spouse that is recently unemployed or underemployed, some may have childcare or parent-care issues, some may have health issues, financial issues or

relationship issues. If we really want employees to be engaged and passionately contribute to the organization then we need to be passionate about positively contributing to their lives. Employees that are better able to cope with the demands of their life are much more able to bring mental energy, creativity and productivity to the workplace. Obviously, an organization can't be expected to solve all employees' problems but it can provide low cost opportunities to make life easier for them. Facilitating drop off/pick up dry cleaning service, chair massages and lunch delivery are old standbys but you can add to these by asking employees for suggestions on other low-cost conveniences that you can provide. Overall, employees that feel respected and taken care of are much more likely to want to go the extra mile for the good of the company.

Lighten up and have a little fun

Employees in organizations that have been heavily negatively impacted by the economy seem to be having about as much fun as players and fans of the losing team in a sporting event. The mood can be downright depressing. Lifting their spirits through fun can pay off. Each year, the Great Place to Work Institute asks tens of thousands of employees to rate their experience of workplace factors, including, "This is a fun place to work." On Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work For" list, employees in companies that are denoted as "great" responded overwhelmingly - an average of 81 percent - that they are working in a "fun" environment. In other words, employees at the best companies are also having the best time. So, hold an employee talent show, sponsor video game playoffs, have a miniature golf challenge in the hallway or invite the local jugglers and acrobats to perform. Just generate some excitement and go have some fun!

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