

Signature Press

FIVE EASY STEPS TO MAKE YOUR STAFF FEEL SECURE IN AN UNSTABLE ECONOMY



By John Ely
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You can't escape the talk about today's economy. Everywhere you turn, you hear talk about the recession-like atmosphere we find ourselves in. During the election process, polls showed that the economy was the number-one issue as we inched closer to the second Tuesday in November, and many media outlets focused heavily on the crisis. From the initial meltdown of the housing industry, mortgage crisis, financial and stock market woes, we were (and are) continually bombarded with negative messages about our future.

All of this negativity doesn't escape your employees and staff. In fact, the number one fear during economic downturns is loss of a job. By November 2008, the unemployment rate in the United States had hit a 14-year high, combined with the bleak outlook for the first three quarters of 2009. Add the debt incurred and the pressure of the holiday season, and your staff is probably feeling more stress than ever!

Helping your staff understand they are making a difference in your business gives them a sense of job security. Use training and encouragement to empower your employees and make them feel like an important part of the team, even during a less-than-stable economy.

In a past job, I was in the unenviable position of knowing we may be facing work slow-downs or even worse, a series of layoffs. My supervisor came to all department managers expressing how important our roles were for the company's survival, and in turn, we as a department stepped up our

efforts to be more efficient and pay even closer attention to quality and customer satisfaction.

By doing this, the manager accomplished a few things. He made us feel more secure about our jobs and the company. This had a huge impact on our performance because we knew what we did had a direct result on the company. He also instilled a sense that the company needed our talent and skills to not only be more competitive, but to simply survive. He made sure we all understood how our roles fit into the ultimate corporate strategy and we felt a greater sense of loyalty as a result. Nothing brings people together like a common enemy, and the current economic crisis is a danger to us all.

Even though my colleagues and I were facing some lean times, we felt more energized as a group setting out to overcome the economic struggles. All of this led to better interaction amongst employees and better communication with our clients.

So how do you go about settling the mounting fears of your team during these uncertain and challenging times? Following are five easy ways to start calming the crew:

I. Seek out personal interaction.

Insist on one-on-one interaction with your team — not just e-mail or bulletin announcements. Set a positive tone in person. Many times bad news is communicated in an e-mail announcement because it's quicker and non-confrontational. So, get used to talking to your staff in person. It ensures that each employee feels like they have a connection with you and the company.

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Also, when appropriate, set one-on-one appointments with team members. This gives employees an added sense of connection with you as their supervisor.

2. Use consistent messaging to all employees.

Consistent, proactive messaging helps destroy rumors before they can start. During trying times rumors are more prevalent. Cut them off at the pass by delivering business changes or updates in a timely manner. Don't give the rumor mill a chance to be created in the first place. A regular business update meeting is a great way to communicate during a slow period. Employees get the correct message and also look forward to the next update.

3. Make an investment in your employees' future.

Training is still the best investment that you can make in your staff. It not only gives them skills to outperform the competition, it sends the right message — that you want them there for the long haul and that you want them to succeed. Training can also have a residual effect of improving morale and motivation. I see it all the time — people come out of training events excited about their newly learned skills as well as their roles within the company.

Training also improves job efficiency. This is especially important if the company is not hiring new employees or has lost staff members.

4. Empower your staff.

Nobody works harder than the owner of a company, so why not give tasks, duties and responsibilities that instill a sense of importance and ownership? A great way I've found to do this (and also make my job easier) is to ask for input on projects, processes and current procedures. You'd be amazed how many great ideas you'll get when you involve your staff in the decision making process, and it gives employees the feeling that their input really matters.

5. Have an "open door"

communication policy with management.

Even if it's not used, an open communication policy lets staff know that nobody is off limits for them to approach. I've been involved with groups of senior management that wanted to hide out during bad times. This is not only a bad management technique, it erodes the trust and confidence in upper management. Be willing to spend time with your staff talking about whatever is on their mind. Encourage them to speak up, which also squelches the rumors. Everyone wants to know their manager cares about them, not only as an employee, but as a person too.

While it's always important to invest in your staff, simple measures can help them feel valued and important, especially in turbulent times. Whether it's a down economy, or a slower travel season, job security helps staff perform their job with a purpose and a dedicated commitment to the company.