

Engaging Employees in Tough Times

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With the financial changes in the economy, nonprofit organizations are under increasing pressure to stay viable while at the same time are facing an increased need for their services. As a result of layoffs or other cost cutting efforts, employees are being asked to do more with limited resources. In an economic downturn, lower turnover is often more a reflection of the need for job security and a paycheck than employee satisfaction with the employer. In this environment management

also feels under stress and can fall into the mindset that employees should just be happy to have a job.

Yet in an article in the Feb. 2009 *Fortune Magazine*, Jim Collins talks about what is important to companies in troubled times and stated "...companies, when they went through the Depression, really understood that it was the caliber of their people that would get them through." **Now more than ever it is important to engage and motivate your employees.**

Definition and Impact of Employee Engagement

To start with, what is employee engagement? **Engagement goes beyond simply retaining an employee; it looks at the contribution of energy, enthusiasm and passion a person brings to work.** Engagement is a commitment of both the mind and the heart. People are looking for more than a job, they are looking to work at a place where their life counts and what they do matters.

Signs of disengagement include loss of interest, commitment and involvement. The impact on your organization shows up as lower employee productivity, a decrease in donations, a higher number of mistakes and a lack of new ideas. All of these factors hurt your ability to stay afloat and grow in your ability to provide important services to the community. So what can be done when you may be low on funds and your employees feel overworked? The following ways can help energize your employees (including yourself) to sustain a positive work environment.

Focus on Your Mission

Be clear on what you stand for and how employees fit into your mission and goals. Every employee needs to know **how and where he or she**

fits in and how to make a difference. Often lower paid and less visible positions get overlooked. Yet each employee has the opportunity to create a positive emotional connection with people who come in contact with your organization. Every contact in turn affects your organization's reputation and funding.

In addition, setting clear priorities tied to your mission keeps the focus on what is most important. Look for ways to drop low priority items to help relieve the pressure and help employees use their energy and talent on top priorities.

Keep Communication Lines Open and Authentic

Maintaining employee trust is critical. Be honest about why the organization is struggling and what you are doing to address the problems. If a business strategy didn't work out, admit it, discuss damage control and seek the employees' help and input. Otherwise, the message may inadvertently imply that employees are at fault. Move past blame and shame and focus instead on learning from what worked and didn't work and ways to move forward.

In times of uncertainty, anxiety increases and employees need to have their concerns addressed more than once. Look for ways for management to stay visible and in touch with what employees are facing on a daily basis. While it is important to provide accurate and clear information about how the organization is doing, it is just as important to ask good questions and genuinely listen to employees.

Encourage Creativity

Give employees the freedom to come up with new ways of achieving results. Employees want to be a part of helping the organization through tough times. When Apollo 13 was in a critical situation, mission control figured out creative ways to use the materials available in the spacecraft to save the astronauts lives. **Thinking outside the box may be the key to your organization's survival.** Every

employee should be a part of a brainstorming session about ways your organization can increase funding/donations and have positive visibility in the community.

Take Time to Say Thank You and Celebrate

While you may not have monetary rewards to offer, taking the time to give employees a genuine and specific thank you is one of the most lasting forms of recognition. Giving employees a generic "thanks for working so hard" can come across fluffy and fake. **Look for ways to personalize the thank you** such as a handwritten note or e-card. Look for ways to recognize group efforts such as an ice cream social or bringing in pizza for lunch. Celebrate small as well as large achievements. Celebrations develop momentum, evoke a sense of camaraderie and break the tension.

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Provide Learning Opportunities

Training and development can be another way employees feel rewarded and recognized. Look for ways to provide both personal and professional lunch and learn sessions. Personal sessions could be focused on managing finances, dealing with stress, and communicating with teenagers. Professional sessions could be focused on utilizing technology, expanding skills, and time management. The cost for these

sessions can be reduced or at no cost by tapping into in-house experts or partnering with local colleges, recreation districts and other nonprofits.

Engaged employees are more productive, and more likely to stay with an organization through good times, and bad. As you look over the above ideas, think about what you would like to start doing or do more of to provide you and your employees with a positive work environment.



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