

Seven Expedient Ways to Keep Your Workforce Highly Productive Through Volatile Times

The tough economy has employees stressed in nearly every organization of every size, in every industry -- particularly those who have seen their coworkers laid off.

The sickening fear that pervades an organization, ironically, interferes with productivity at the very time when you need the most productivity per employee that you've ever needed and employees most want to be at their very best.

The fear manifests itself differently for each employee, but generally you should be on the lookout for three signs:

- Freezing, generally in the form of reluctance to make any decision that involves even the slightest risk of alienating a powerful person, and an increase in escalations of matters they used to work out themselves.
- Wasting time by advocating a point of view without any facts to back it up, although the employee will be quite certain his or her point is correct.
- Taking a great deal more time to accurately complete tasks that used to come easily and quickly, despite the employee's best efforts to work quickly and accurately.

There are seven expedient ways to create an environment in which employees can better deal with the seismic change and volatility around them and get back to optimum productivity:

1. *Fully engage the front line in improving operations and customer intimacy.* The best improvements come from the people doing the work. In my own consulting, I spend a great deal more time with those doing the work than with the executive team. They best understand the challenges in acquiring customers, keeping customers happy, creating and delivering products and services, keeping track of it all, and maintaining compliance with all laws and regulations and often have the best ideas for improvements which can be quickly implemented.
2. *Reserve unilateral top-down decisions only to those which need extremely fast movement, or which are so sensitive that collaboration would be inappropriate.* I'm reminded of the executive who actually asked each of his direct reports for their recommendation of which of the team members should be let go – not *their* team members, *their peers* who were also his direct reports. Yikes. O.k., there's one situation in which a unilateral, top-down decision would actually be a good thing, but workforce buy-in and quick implementation of most other decisions will be greatly improved by involving the next level down in making the decision, not just implementing a decision made by the level above.
3. *Use your crisis recovery team, if you have one, for input on how to respond to various crises which erupt along the way.* Their preparation may have been for earthquakes, floods, and major power outages, don't underestimate their ability to apply the same skills, mindset, cross-functional collaboration, and processes to providing outstanding recommendations and implementation in other fast-moving situations.

4. *Give extra effort to ensure the ongoing successful integration of executives who were hired from outside.* Fully 40% of these executives are pushed out, fail, or quit within 18 months of their hire date. I'm not exaggerating here – three separate studies support the same point. Your workforce doesn't need this additional volatility, created entirely from within rather than by economic pressures. The power to help these executives go from outsiders to insiders lies entirely with you.
5. *Let employees be friends.* Often employees will shake themselves out of an unproductive funk because they don't want to let down or burden the friends with whom they work. While many managers tell me they are uncomfortable with this idea of friendships at work, it's been proven time and again to improve loyalty and productivity in organizations. People bond. Don't try to stop it.
6. *If you are a manager, ask your team to frankly tell you the greatest obstacles to their productivity and then work with them and on their behalf to address these.* A Canadian study confirmed what I've observed – that employees give their best efforts for a boss who is strong enough to directly address obstacles to productivity instead of passively just telling them to work around it.
7. *Publicly acknowledge their contributions and take extra precautions that you do not imply that their ideas were yours or that the success is yours, not theirs.* This can not be overemphasized in a fiscal environment in which monetary rewards are so limited, and in truth, for most employees who earn enough to cover their bills and put food on the table, the money has never mattered as much as proper recognition.