

Welcome to the thirteenth edition of Jennifer Selby Long's *Traveling Light*. Are you blessed with the talent and opportunity to lead? *Traveling Light* will skyrocket your impact and lighten the load inherent in your life. It's based on the work of executive coach and management consultant Jennifer Selby Long. Copyright 2008 Jennifer Selby Long. All rights reserved.

The Five Best Ways Improve Your Organization during a Recession

Are you feeling the squeeze? With so many companies bracing for a recession, leaders find themselves under pressure to stop investing in organizational improvements. But we all know that acting rashly causes problems. Morale goes down, and when the economy improves, you've got to start over from scratch.

It amazes me how otherwise rational leaders will just start hacking away at an itty bitty leadership development or training budget with more attention than they devote to other operational expenses 20, 30, or 100 times higher.

Here are five ways you can intelligently s-t-r-e-t-c-h that development investment during a downturn, and avoid all of the problems caused by indiscriminate budget cuts:

1. First things first: get crystal clear about the competencies your organization needs in order to execute the business strategy. Let's say your organization is shifting from being a profit center to being a cost center in support of bigger business units. This is not an unusual scenario in a downturn, as leaders ask their organizations to line up around the biggest bets instead of experimenting with multiple, smaller, and unproven bets. There's probably a gap between your organization's current ability to collaborate cross-functionally and what is now needed, since they've been encouraged to work independently in the past.

Check to be sure that's true, and if it is, focus your organizational improvement efforts on enablers of cross-functional collaboration such as creating interlocking processes, establishing clear lines of accountability, and honing your leaders' ability to collaborate with other leaders.

Note how modest this line item can turn out to be, if you play it right. You may need a process redesign pro to help with the development of interlocking processes, an OD or HR consultant to help think through how to establish clear lines of accountability in a cross-functional environment, and an OD consultant to hone skills in collaborative leadership. You'll also probably need someone to handle internal communications about the change.

All of these people could work behind the scenes as advisors if your internal people can take the advice and run with it, saving a lot of consulting fees. Maybe you even have one or more of these internal resources available and need no line item at all.

Either way, the return will be huge relative to the investment, because you're focusing very specific and limited resources to address an essential business need. In this particular situation, we're not even really talking about solving a problem, we're talking about raising the bar and enabling significant change, which is an

exciting place to be. Who knew you could actually have exciting organizational development during a recession?

2. Identify the root causes of any significant problems before agreeing to a budget number. Do not settle for, "Cut the technical training budget by 20%," which is a silly request because it has no bearing on the business. Figure out if your internal training is solving -- or at least helping to solve -- the most critical problems of the business. If it's not, *chuck all of it*, not just 20%. Believe me, you'll be the CFO's new best friend and employees who have been stuck in irrelevant training classes will cheer. Then figure out which training, if any, will help address critical business needs, and rebuild your budget from the bottom up. It's never too late to get this right. If you're too late in the game for this year, start the process with an eye on setting next year's budget based on real need, not just the previous year's number.
3. Get creative about continuing your business-critical organizational development investments, with the goal of sustaining and moving forward until better times allow you to take bigger leaps. For example, it's essential to develop your high-potential leaders on an ongoing basis, during good times and bad, but do you really need to fly them all to Tuscany, or would an easy-in/easy-out business center like Frankfurt do? How about focusing on local rotational assignments instead of bigger development "events" that increase opex? How about utilizing other technologies to develop them? Even something as dirt-cheap as a quarterly book club is a way to keep the process moving forward until better times. You could host it via Webex, or a conference call, or a blog, or a wiki (o.k., maybe a wiki is a stretch...).
4. Don't compare apples to oranges. The \$25,000 investment to coach a new senior leader in a mission-critical role may create more return than a similarly priced generic training program for the masses. Be relentless at evaluating the return you can expect from every organizational development investment.
5. Where possible and feasible, switch from individuals to groups. Again, in the leadership development realm, group coaching can be quite effective, and costs less than coaching 15 or 20 leaders one-on-one. You won't reap the full benefits of 1:1 coaching, but you'll have the benefit of building relationships between up-and-coming leaders and you'll keep the process moving forward. Nothing kills credibility like a repeated pattern of excellent programs that launch with a big bang during good times and then unceremoniously get the ax during bad times. Far better to keep it going on a shoestring than to let it die.

News

Do you have news for the *Traveling Light* community? If so, let us know. The decision of what to include will be at the sole discretion of the editor.

May 9 – 27

On vacation in Spain. I'll be available for client consultations May 8 until 3:00, at which time I head to the airport and say, "*Adios! Hasta la vista!*"

All coaching client engagements are automatically extended three weeks, so you won't miss a thing.

If you want to meet with me May 5 – 8, please get on my calendar soon, because it's filling up fast.

Contact us for further information at: lighten@selbygroup.com.

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Jennifer Selby Long
Selby Group