

Managing in Difficult Times – 10 Things to Do To Keep People Engaged

BY BOB LIVINGSTON

Getting a team of people to perform at their best in a declining environment presents special challenges. The impact of a drumbeat of negative news can be distracting at best, and debilitating at worst. How can leaders avoid a negative spiral and instead turn the challenge into positive energy?

Be transparent and realistic. Avoid the temptation to sugar coat issues –or to overdramatize them. Adopt a ‘no spin’ mentality, since over optimism - or ‘the sky is falling’ - will hurt credibility and the willingness of people put energy into supporting your plans. People need first to be able to deal with factual reality – as long as it comes with confidence that there is a plan to ride out the storm.

Over-communicate. Don’t forget that the level of real knowledge about what is going on deteriorates rapidly down through the organization, particularly when conditions are changing quickly. People can invent bad scenarios far in excess of what is even being contemplated – simply because they have no other data. Or, the blissfully ignorant go through thinking there is no problem or that it belongs to someone else, so they do nothing different. In uncertain times, where messages may have difficulty breaking through the clutter, it is better to risk hearing ‘you told me that before’ than leaving people to invent their own scenario. When people know what is going on, they can be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Have a clear and credible plan, and engage people in it. Few teams – sports or business - perform well during a confidence crisis. You won’t have a perfect plan, but one that is directionally right is better than perfect – because then people can engage in how to make it better. But, you are in trouble if you don’t have a credible answer to ‘how do we see our way to get on top of this mess?’

Build people’s belief in themselves. Constant fire drills chasing the daily numbers, the weekly shipments, the monthly performance is necessary but can sap energy, particularly when it results in senior leaders micro-manging the business. It robs people of their selfconfidence, and lowers their own accountability to personally deliver. Expect performance then enable people to do it – don’t do it for them, around them, or over them.

Do your best to minimize personal distractions for people. If people are concerned about the continuity of their employment, full engagement on the business is impossible. If this is not a realistic concern, say so. If it is – then acknowledge it, but explain what approach you would take if it came to that. Advance notice, using voluntary methods whenever possible, retraining/new placement support, financial bridging support – the benefits of people knowing there is a reasonable plan to handle a possibly bad outcome

far outweigh any negative from bringing the possibility up in the first place. And if you don't have answers to questions – at least have an answer for when you will.

Abandon the temptation for control – accept ambiguity and help people develop coping skills. There is no way to insulate people from the winds of change. And you can't promise anyone that 'this will be over soon.' But you can help to equip people to deal with it better. Deliberately invest in the individual, building skills for them that will help them prosper regardless of what the environment brings. Sometimes what happens out there is beyond our control – but what can be controlled and helped is how individuals are equipped to respond.

Focus people on the here and now – its ok to be short term focused for a while. This is not to suggest moving away from long term goals. But in times of uncertainty, something more tangible and closer provides a better anchor for people to focus. Uncertainty and reflection will breed anxiety in an unstable environment.

Pay particular attention to your personal equity and its impact. If the general is scared, the troops will be running for the exits. As a leader, do people look up to you as part of the way forward, or a victim of the same problems?

Don't postpone difficult choices. If you have difficult choices to make, make them while things are difficult. Postponing them – if the need to be dealt with eventually – may mean you find yourself explaining a 'down' action right into the teeth of a rising tide everywhere else. Do you want to have to explain round two of a necessary hierarchy reduction when the rest of the economy has turned to expansion again?

Be in touch with what is going on with your people. Often the subject of what happens outside the workplace is ignored or deemed inappropriate or unimportant. When the outside environment is uncertain, you can assume that many people who don't appear to be directly affected probably are – by a family member, spouse, or close friend. This is important context to help people through this time – and help you as a leader understand why some people may 'not exactly be themselves this week.'

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