

Engaging employees starts with managers



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We've known for years that managers are the front-line stewards of organizational culture, leading the way in creating an inspiring, productive workplace. In these challenging times, their role is even more important.

In 2010 Leigh Branham and I wrote a book called *Re-Engage: How America's Best Places to Work Inspire Extra Effort in Extraordinary Times*. We wrote about the importance of managers taking on even more of a responsibility in inspiring and engaging employees. A decade has passed but managers can still use this advice to make a difference right now.

- **Work to build or rebuild trust.** This is your most important mission. Be open and forthcoming with information, remembering that bad news is better than no news. Face-to-face communication (even if it's virtual) is recommended for trust building.
- **Don't hide behind email communication.** Act with integrity. Show courage in front of your team by asking for help or admitting you were wrong if you were.
- **Be credible and honest.** Don't say it's "business as usual." It isn't, so you might as well acknowledge that fact. Before giving out information, make sure it is accurate. If you don't know the answer to a question, say you'll find out and get back to your team as quickly as possible. If you can't tell as much as you know, simply say, "I'm not able to answer that right now." Never lie. If you're caught in a lie, no matter how small, you'll sabotage all your previous efforts to reach out, no matter how sincere they were.
- **Be a good listener, allowing employees to vent and express their concerns.** Seek feedback from direct reports. Know for sure how your team is feeling right now. Make no assumptions.
- **Partner with your employees** on goal setting and evaluation and in addressing the problems that your business faces. Talk with each employee, discuss the current situation and describe the strengths and results you expect in trying times, especially creativity, initiative, resourcefulness and a positive attitude.
- **Hold virtual group sessions** to talk through different economic issues impacting the business and solicit employee ideas for cutting costs and creating new sources of revenue. Ask those who have experienced difficult times or survived wrenching change to share their wisdom with those who haven't.

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- **Give people the personal touch.** Make a point of having one-on-one conversations with everyone on your team. Whatever condition your company is in, an uncertain future affects everyone's ability to focus on the job at hand. Show people you care about them and how they're feeling from one day to the next. Cultivating a sincere interest in just a few people's lives will do so much more than showing just a little interest about a whole lot of people.
- **Hold up the lantern.** In the darkest moments, great leaders and managers show their team there is a light at the end of the tunnel. This means that if you're not clear on the company's plan for surviving and succeeding, keep asking until someone higher up gives you a convincing response.
- **Make sure everybody is on the same page** when it comes to communicating messages to employees, including entry-level supervisors.
- **Squelch rumors quickly.** One miscommunication or tidbit of conversation taken out of context can wreak havoc on morale. Replace rumors, however small they may be, with real information as soon as you get wind of them and encourage employees to do the same.
- **Show respect and give people your full attention.** If you make an appointment or call a meeting, keep it. Show people you care by the little promises you make and keep. Give each person your undivided attention.
- **Don't tell people that they should feel lucky to have a job.** That can be interpreted as a threat—one that is highly disengaging.
- **Continuously assess employee workload.** People are already stressed. Have enough employees to get the work done instead of rewarding the best performers with increased workloads. Remember that there is a strong link between susceptibility to sickness and a stressful work environment. Ask your team to consider how things can be done differently or in a more cost-effective, streamlined way. It may be useful for your team to reexamine how work is being done and whether it should be done any longer.
- **Don't take the weight of the world on your own shoulders** and assume that your team is too burdened to help with the big issues you're working on. In fact, your team probably wants to help.
- **Consider setting goals on a shorter basis instead of longer term.** This creates a stronger tie between employees' actions and the

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resulting accomplishment and allows you to change expectations quickly as the situation unfolds. Set easier-to-achieve goals if possible to create opportunities to experience and celebrate small successes.

- **Focus on retaining valued employees** in anticipation of the higher turnover rates expected as businesses recover from the instability at hand. Schedule one-on-one time with key people to remind them of their value to the team. Now more than ever, know what motivates each employee.
- **Strategically upgrade your staff.** Understand and plan for future staffing needs today, especially when many talented people are in the job market.
- **Challenge employees to step up.** Communicate that success or failure will be determined by how the team responds under pressure. Get employees to commit to what they will do each week to further the best interests of the business. Reward suggestions from employees who have ideas about making the business more efficient.

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