

Business Bullet ~ Employee Morale: Lessons from the Downturn

Have you heard the quote, “The beatings will continue until morale improves?” In our fast-paced, high-expectation business world, along with an economic downturn, delayed raises/bonuses, and maybe layoffs, you have the perfect recipe for the rapid downward spiral of employee morale.

Just like you, myself and other businesses I know have encountered tremendous change over the past couple of years. We’ve survived everything from a self-induced rebranding to the natural course of client and employee turnover—a significant recession after unprecedented growth. And this is actually the third downturn in the economy that I have lived and worked through, making my business career a long learning lesson.

And while change is sometimes a breath of fresh air, even positive changes can create anxiety, which can have a dramatic impact on everything from the mailroom to the boardroom. A negative shift in morale can cause paralysis and the inability for employees to do their best work (or even the bare minimum, for that matter).

For business managers and owners, when change is invited or cannot be avoided, employee morale can become a very hot topic. I have had some successes, and an equal number of constructive failures, in my efforts to address morale in the workplace over the course of my long career. What I have witnessed and learned from have proven invaluable in my current effort to advise others to transition from negativity, martyrdom and cynicism to energy, enthusiasm and productivity. Here are some lessons learned on salvaging the spirit of your brand champions:

1. Sometimes, wasting time can be the best remedy for a lack of productivity. Ironically, decreasing pressure put on employees and other team members to ‘get back to work’ can translate into a more productive workforce. Particularly if business is a little slow, take half the time you’d otherwise use stressing about the lull and apply it to something fun and not necessarily work-related. Some of my clients have introduced picnic lunches, fun meetings off site, even departmental all-day fun field competitions. Though it halts any signs of progress for client work, it has proven to reignite a sense of internal camaraderie and company pride—two things that can do wonders for employee morale.
2. Make it personal. No one likes to feel like “employee #70.” But in the normal course of doing business, they can be made to feel like that. Make a point to publicly recognize examples of work well done and give specific kudos to those who made it all possible. A brief company-wide email or a personal thank-you cupcake will do wonders.
3. Share the road map for the future of the company. Share some power with employees. That doesn’t mean that you have to consult with them on major decisions that impact your company, but when you surrender some control, you allow employees to take more ownership of how the company functions.
4. Back to basics: keep your door open. Not only figuratively, but literally. Nothing deflates employee morale more than seeing the office doors of upper management closed for hours on end. Speculation starts. Rumors ignite. I’m sure you get the point.
5. Create the opportunity to ‘do good.’ Nothing makes you feel better than helping someone else, so give employees the chance to volunteer or otherwise give back...on your watch. I know many businesses that have received positive feedback from their employees who have been encouraged to take advantage of several days of volunteering each year. Of course, the process you put in place must have its limitations, but launching some sort of volunteer program will be very effective on your employee morale, as well as the way your business is seen in your marketplace and community.
6. Install a venue for employee communication and bonding. Whether this is a potluck or a blog with commenting functionality, consider creating a medium for employees to interact and connect, ultimately creating a sense of community. Participate in the dialogue—you can learn a lot about the state of morale by simply joining in now and then.
7. Build in some structure. When things are tough and people feel a sense of hopelessness, that dread can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Make sure there is a sense of structure to the day-in/day-out efforts of your staff, and that standard reporting, procedures, etc., are maintained. Though this might sound remedial, it gives people a sense of purpose and belonging.
8. Encourage cross-training. Create the chance for employees to learn tips and skills from people who do something different from themselves within your organization. This can sometimes reenergize an employee and, in many cases, allows them to gain new skills that help them with their core job. Similarly, make sure that management is in the habit of inviting more junior team members to planning/strategy sessions (when appropriate). Ask for their input—you never know where a good idea might come from. Even if they don’t contribute, it’s still great to feel a part of the team.

And remember, now is not the time to change for change's sake. When employee morale—and, consequently, productivity, is low, it's not the time for unnecessary changes, like those to a benefits plan, office hours, teams, etc. This runs the risk of causing a ripple in an employee's sense of security and for their foundation to be rocked even more. Try incorporating all or just some of these ideas into your company culture, and watch the effect of a boost in your employee morale.

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