



TOP TIPS



Engaging through the downturn

In these difficult times how do organisations engage with their people? We have put together ten “top tips” to help manage through the next two years so that people emerge from the recession feeling great about the way their company and their leaders handled the tough times.

Here are ten top tips to help create engagement during difficult times:

1

Lead from the front

Ensure leaders increase their visibility during uncertain times and provide opportunities for people to question them about current priorities and performance. Equip the whole leadership team to act as a corporate body so that each member can front face to face sessions with groups about the issues, challenges, and planned changes. In particular, provide a clear line on the rationale for redundancy, relocation or closure decisions and make sure every manager is clear about how decisions have been reached (or the process by which a decision will be reached).

2

Keep ears close to the ground

Find out what is on peoples’ minds. Conduct or commission focus groups and telephone surveys, and/or talk to line managers and staff at every opportunity to find out how people are feeling, what their key questions are and what they are worried about. Prepare a summary of this feedback on a regular basis for leadership and ensure these topics get addressed in the communications within the business.

3

Focus on short-term

Tell people what needs to happen this week, this month and in this quarter. Don’t talk vision or mission; talk about sales, productivity, customer service, and what is going to help get the business through the next few weeks and months. As one manager put it to us recently: “Talking about the vision and the mission means nothing to staff who fear they may not be staying here.”

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Focus on winners not just losers

If jobs are going, treat leavers with respect so that they and others feel that they have been treated fairly. But remember that the long-term future of the business will depend upon the engagement of those who will be staying. Their perception of how the organisation treats leavers will be important but they need to know now as much about what the future holds for them as possible.

5

Anticipate negative reactions

Remember the change curve. If people are presented with bad news about their future they may push back, refuse to hear the message, look for other solutions, etc. Allow them time to react and help by re-iterating bad news and offering sources of help and support. For a fuller version of how to communicate at various stages of the change curve [click here](#).

6

Keep communication adult to adult

Deal in reasons and facts and listen to others' points of view. Many organisations and managers planning communication during difficult times adopt a nurturing ("We'll look after you", "Let us help you") or critical parent ("We know more than you", "This is in your best interests") approach. Both approaches are likely to diminish the effectiveness of communication as they provoke emotional responses from audiences. To stay adult keep it rational, factual, objective, and two-way.

7

Up skill managers

Invest in communication skills for managers to help them take their people through change. One of the most challenging tasks for managers is to cope with a lack of information at a time when information is in huge demand. Most managers benefit from the opportunity to work with colleagues on how to deal with difficult situations, address questions, keep communication objective and constructive and support people through change. A recent survey amongst senior managers in an organisation going through a major downsize identified that the most valued support (requested by 75% of managers) was short, two-hour workshops on site or local to build skills and confidence (the second most popular was on-line training – 70%).

8

Openness

Share as much information as you can. Highlight the issues that the business faces, what is not clear, what is ambiguous and what is scary. People may not like it but they can cope with bad news and uncertainty better than being kept in the dark. We know this from our everyday experiences, and it allows us, as adults, to start making contingency plans. People also need to understand the need for change and open communication of threats, challenges and uncertainty increases this.



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Involve

Invite input from people on what they think the business needs to do to be successful. Increase, do not decrease, opportunities for people to contribute their views and ideas. Remember the bravery of IBM when, with its back to the wall, it launched WorldJam to gather input and ideas from its entire workforce, and to demonstrate its commitment to its own value set.

10

Stakeholder management

Use natural advocates to help support key messages. But also keep those who may damage morale and the business especially close. Invite both to special briefings so that you can get them spreading the message you want others to hear. They will be the most credible messengers.

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