

Boston Business Journal

September 5, 2008
Preview Edition

AS WE LIVE AND WORK



Barrie Sanford Greiff, M.D.



Richard J. Levin, Ed.D.

EVEN IN DOWN TIMES, YOU CAN BOOST EMPLOYEE MORALE

It's the beginning of a new season. The onset of Fall with its cool, fresh nighttime air is traditionally a time of high energy and hope.

But for many this is a different kind of autumn. Uncertainty is pervasive. People significantly modified their summer vacations, trading them in for closer-to-home "staycations". The Iraqi war has dimmed next to our direct personal concerns: the escalating costs of products we once took for granted -- food, commodities and energy. Cities are licking their wounds after unsuccessful attempts to raise taxes. People are worried about the

diminishing value of their home, the rising educational costs for their kids, and the yearly double-digit increase in their health care premiums. Many of these people have been through tough times before. But this time around they're feeling this is more than just a blip on the screen. They're battening down the hatches, expecting this to be a protracted and perhaps permanently life-changing cycle. They feel that whatever is happening is not within their control and will profoundly impact their business' and family's future.

Economists tell us we're not in a recession (two consecutive down quarters.) But that technical explanation does little to allay the anxiety of businesspeople who have seen their top and bottom lines dwindle, and have been forced to lay people off. With such a pessimistic scenario, it is easy to get down. But we can't afford to hunker down in a darkroom where negatives develop.

Challenging times require different behaviors. What can we do?

“Don't panic!”. That's the advice of Modiv Media's Chairman and CEO Paul Schaut. “Keep an open door and answer questions” says Schaut, whose company is a leader in self-service, in-store, digital media. “Do everything you can to clarify or remove uncertainty. And collaborate with trusted associates.”

Leaders agree that one of the best ways to keep employees UP in down times is to further open the lines of communication. Chip Bell, Principal of the Texas-based customer service consulting firm, the Chip Bell Group, says "It is important that we tell the complete truth about our challenges, trust our people, involve them in the tough decisions, never compromise our values, nor lose sight of our mission".

Bell even finds a silver lining in down times. "Nothing motivates or inspires employees more", says Bell, "than to be treated as a valued, contributing part of a team that is taking on challenges in a way that relies on their talents, energy and spirit. When the going gets tough, the tough find passion, purpose and perseverance."

Michael London, President and CEO of the educational consulting firm College Coach, concurs with Bell. "Best performers get through tough economic times with an understanding that they need to do even more than usual to be successful", says London. "Many have their best years when the challenges are most difficult. It is really their opportunity to shine".

In our experience, savvy leaders share a number of attributes in the way they manage during down times:

- They pay attention to fundamentals. They set goals, reinforce core values, and prioritize.
- They're nimble in their decision-making and actions.
- They're not fearful of taking calculated risks. If layoffs are necessary, they apply a selective rationale and make the hard call.
- They reassess talent in their organization. That means reallocating resources, giving some people more responsibilities and assigning new or different roles to others.
- They effectively communicate expectations to their people - timely, honest, and focused - and they measure performance against clear standards.
- They maintain a positive attitude, adhering to the dictum that the pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity, while the optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.
- They create a spirit of ownership that's infectious. It strengthens the team and puts the emphasis on contribution rather than helplessness.
- They make tough decisions. They reinforce certain aspects of the business and drop others. All with the idea that you never take a fence down until you know why it was put up in the first place.

While the focus of our column is on the human side of business, far-reaching change will likely come from quickly-developed and rapidly-deployed new technologies that will lessen the pressure on energy consumption and the surging prices of commodities. But it will take strong people to deliver on this goal - people who use every conceivable method to reinforce their resilience: body, mind, and spirit. When all is said and done, resilience and innovation will separate those who stay in the game from those who capitulate. Ultimately, it's a matter of changing our collective perspective. When we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change.

BARRIE SANFORD GREIFF, M.D., former psychiatrist at the Harvard Business School, consults for a number of organizations and practices in Cambridge. He can be reached at bgreiff18@aol.com. RICHARD J. LEVIN, Ed.D. is an executive coach, leadership developer, and business advisor based in Wellesley Hills. He is a commentator on PBS's Nightly Business Report, and can be reached at rlevin@RichardLevinAssociates.com.