

Terry Tanker
Publisher
ttanker@hvacrbusiness.com

Jack Hutchinson
Vice President Sales
jhutchinson@hvacrbusiness.com

Jim McDermott
Vice President
Editorial Director
jmcdermott@hvacrbusiness.com

Heather Onorati
Editor-in-Chief
honorati@hvacrbusiness.com

Brian Willse
Art Director
bwillse@hvacrbusiness.com

Carrie Wing
Designer

Angela Vannucci
Circulation Manager
avannucci@hvacrbusiness.com

Barbara Kerr
Executive Assistant
bkerr@hvacrbusiness.com

Nauman Saeed
Chief Technology Officer
nsaeed@hvacrbusiness.com

editorial advisory board
W. Theodore (Theo) Etzel
Ruth King
Ronald L. (Ron) Smith

contributors
Mike P. Coyne
Tom Piscitelli

submissions
editorial submissions:
honorati@hvacrbusiness.com

advertising staff
SOUTH CENTRAL

Jack Hutchinson
Vice President
Tel 440-234-3542
Fax 440-234-3698
jhutchinson@hvacrbusiness.com

MIDWEST

Mark A. Wiebusch
Midwest Regional
Sales Manager
Tel 440-835-9733
Fax 440-835-9734
Cell 440-915-4773
mwiebusch@hvacrbusiness.com

EAST COAST

Jim Clifford
East Coast Regional
Sales Manager
Tel 201-362-5561
Fax 201-334-9186
jclifford@hvacrbusiness.com

SOUTH EAST

Steve Copley
South East Regional
Sales Manager
Tel 440-882-6656
Fax 440-234-3698
scopley@hvacrbusiness.com

SOUTH (Florida)

Bob Eck
Regional Sales Manager
Tel/Fax 352-391-5577
Cell 330-283-8360
beck@hvacrbusiness.com

WEST COAST

Miguel Ornelas
West Coast Regional
Sales Manager
Tel 818-834-4232
Fax 818-834-0262
mornelas@hvacrbusiness.com

www.hvacrbusiness.com

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18100 Jefferson Park Road
Suite 103
Cleveland, OH 44130
Tel: (440) 234-3542
Fax: (440) 234-3698

Web site: www.hvacrbusiness.com
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Editor's Page

BY HEATHER ONORATI

Preoccupied Personnel

Your knack for shrewd business strategy should include tactics for keeping employees focused, motivated and committed.

Even if business is thriving, it's possible that the economic atmosphere is impacting your company by means of distracted, less productive employees.

We are bombarded by reports of economic doom and gloom. Layoffs, recession, foreclosures, bailouts, and deflation are only some of the terms beating us over the heads. The result is that all companies are making cutbacks and tightening budgets. The impact on personnel is that employees feel fearful, anxious and stressed.

"Most workers are concerned about their jobs ... That fear factor creates stress, which results in more illness and less productivity," says Susan Wilson Solovic, CEO and co-founder of SBTV.com (small business television).

When left unchecked, high levels of stress and fear can lead to a number of problems, according to Steve Crimando, Managing Director of Extreme Behavioral Risk Management, LLC. These feelings are powerful forces in shaping behavior. It is important to understand their roles in the current financial climate and to anticipate their affect on your employees, he says.

At best, we're talking about slight distractions and slips in productivity.

Personal financial stress can impact how your employees function at work if they are simply distracted by their problems, or are attempting to deal with creditors and other issues while at work, Solovic says.

At worst, we're talking health or behavioral problems, or accidents.

Workers in service trades or manufacturing environments, who are operating potentially dangerous equipment, working at heights or in such settings that require full attention to safety, can potentially harm themselves if high levels of stress interfere with sleep or concentration, Crimando says.

So how do you as a manager remain vigilant of the impact on your business and offset the negative external influences?

Leading by example

First of all, it's up to you as the leader to provide structure, and to be the guiding force. You have to specify the direction and then model the behavior and the spirit that you want your employees to perceive and to follow.

"When things seem chaotic, the manager's job is to create a sense of order and structure. The manager needs to spend more time than usual being explicit about expectations, goals, and directives. Be specific, be respectful, and be direct," says Bill Treasurer, author and CEO of Giant Leap Consulting, a consulting, coaching, and training company.

Theo Etzel, president of Conditioned Air in Naples, Fla. and *HVACR Business* advisor adds that, as the leader, whether you like it or not, you're on stage the moment you walk in the building. Your employees will take their cues from how you look and act. So regardless of what you hear on the radio on your drive in, or the fact that you think you lost a big contract the night before, you have to put on a controlled and compelling front to keep your employees upbeat and focused on the right things.

That doesn't mean lying, but amid the chaos, you need to be the calming force, Solovic says, you can't stew and fret about things in front of your team. And sometimes it takes extra effort on your part, but you are responsible for maintaining the attitude inside of the office.

"When I approach that front door, I tell myself, 'OK, it's show time,'" Etzel says.

Communicate

All of the experts stress that you must focus on communication. You must make sure that you're providing your employees information about the business and it's stability.

"Explain the situation of the business, and if you have had to make tough decisions, tell your employees why. If a leader isn't communicating, the employees will wonder who's next and when?" Etzel says

He explains that he keeps lines of communication open, not only through face-to-face communication, but also through a monthly "pulse report" detailing new contracts, customers, and marketing initiatives. He says this is a way to keep people informed and show that the company is being proactive.

Even if you're still collecting information and you haven't decided on specific action steps, it's critical to share what you know, says Jenny Schade, President, JRS Consulting, Inc. Any information is better than no information because people tend to fill in the blanks with less than accurate scenarios.

Schade suggests focusing on two levels:

- 1.) The owner or president should provide information about the organization's "big picture." If you're announcing a significant organizational change, it's important to tell the whole story – why is this happening now?
- 2.) Front-line managers should give direct reports more personal information about what an announcement means for their specific jobs. This helps employees understand the state of the business and their own roles in relation.

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In addition, Schade, Solovic and Etzel all stress the importance of making employees part of the solution.

"Ask for their ideas regarding ways to work more efficiently and reduce costs. Show them that you respect their thinking and knowledge of the business. Help them to feel involved in the current challenges as well as in formulating solutions," Schade says.

Solovic adds that you'll be amazed at how creative your employees can be when they feel like they're part of a solution.

Foster Fun

A fun atmosphere helps foster a much-needed positive attitude, and it builds morale, Etzel says.

His office has staff potluck lunches, celebrates birthdays, and they also do an occasional family meet and greet where employees are invited to bring their families for a cookout. It builds camaraderie.

Solovic says some companies go as far as having voluntary fun

committees that plan team building activities. She says her company kicked off the New Year with an SBTV.com trivia game that everyone enjoyed.

Aside from these proactive tips, don't ignore obvious problems. Address them immediately and consistently, Crimando advises. If you notice signs that you have a preoccupied employee, the best action is to confront the person privately and directly, according to Etzel and Solovic. They say that calling the employee's attention to the performance or behavioral issue may be all that's necessary to get that individual back on track.

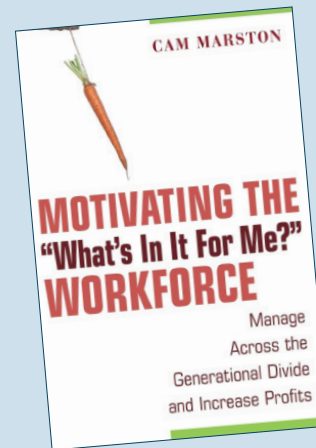
Really, these are tips that apply in any economy. They are simply the basis of strong leadership. So don't forget that shrewd business savvy includes tactics for keeping your employees focused, motivated and committed, and you'll find yourself successfully navigating any economic backdrop.

It's show time! ■

Management Resource Shelf



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Motivating the "What's in it For Me?" Workforce

By Cam Marston

(John Wiley & Sons, \$24.95)

Available through major bookstores and online at www.amazon.com.

Author and consultant, Cam Marston, dissects the motivations, values and viewpoints of each generation in the workplace, and how those differences contribute to problems that arise. In a little more than 200 pages, Marston offers insight, as well as practical solutions for improving manager-employee relations across the age divide.

Grow Your Business - Online

By Greg Bright

(Greg Bright, \$16.95)

Available at www.amazon.com; www.barnesandnoble.com; www.lulu.com; and www.bookpeople.com

In a non-technical, easily understood fashion, author Greg Bright teaches small business owners how to understand the Web, how to be seen by potential customers, and what to do with those visitors who come to your site. He defines some of the terminology and explains what to know to direct your Web designer in the most effective way. For any contractor wanting to know more about creating a successful Web presence, this book is a great start.



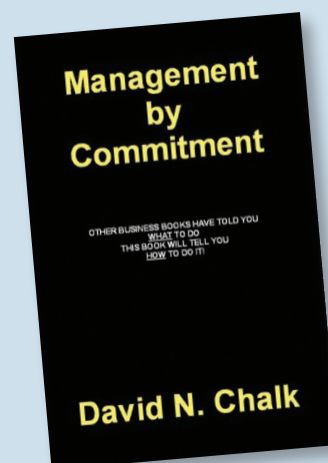
Management by Commitment




By David N. Chalk

(David N. Chalk, \$19.98)

Available through major bookstores and online at www.amazon.com.

This book details a leadership style in which the leader and subordinate, together, define and measure performance goals. In six steps, author David N. Chalk focuses on communication, cooperation, coaching and results, aiming to encourage employee participation and a sense of ownership at all levels, which ultimately fosters commitment. Through his strong background in industrial training and management development, Chalk spells out a successful, collaborative method for managing, motivating and reviewing employees.






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