

Five ways to engage employees left behind

"During economic downturns, many people focus on employees who have lost their jobs or are concerned that they might be laid off," says Jenny Schade, a corporate communications consultant who specializes in working with organizations experiencing restructurings and layoffs.

"But downturns and staff reductions are also difficult for team members left behind. They have to work through the stress of extreme change and often 'do more with less' because of a reduced work force."

Schade, president of JRS Consulting, in Wilmette, Ill., shares five tips for engaging and motivating staff during economic downturns, based on her experience:

1. Continue to communicate, even when you don't have all of the information.

Have senior management provide information about how the economic downturn is affecting the overall organization, then direct supervisors to talk more personally with employees about their concerns, Schade advises.

"This is not a time for formal PowerPoint presentations," she cautions. "It's a time for roll-up-your sleeves candid conversations, including Q&A, about how the organization is handling the downturn. Encourage leadership to get out from behind the podium and get out in front of employees."

2. Ask for employee input about ways to reduce costs and increase efficiency.

"Employees are experts in their field. Many have great ideas about how to be more productive," she says. "Why not ask them to e-mail or personally express their thoughts regarding how the company can save money and increase productivity? We all know that during times of stress, it feels good to be doing something to help."

3. If there will be layoffs, say so and provide as much information as you can.

It's critical that employees hear about the layoffs from management and not from the media.

"Out of respect for employees, Starbucks didn't release the locations of 600 store closings until after it had informed its employees in the stores targeted for closure," Schade says.

"Employees at another company learned of lay-offs while watching Cable News Network in the company health club. A staffperson at that firm noted, 'I guess this company just doesn't care about the working man.'"

4. If the business is underperforming, take responsibility, as appropriate.

When Starbucks announced the closing of 600 stores, a letter posted on its Web site attributed the current difficulties to "poor real estate decisions that were made, coupled with a very troubled economy."

"Bravo to Starbucks for acknowledging that its quest for expansion clouded its judgment in site selection," Schade says.

5. Put some leadership skin in the game.

When there are problems with the business, employees are often the first to go.

"Demonstrate that 'the buck stops here' by announcing how company leadership is also sacrificing," she says. An example? General Motors announced last summer that its top executive officers would receive a reduction in their cash compensation opportunity of 75 to 84 percent.