11 Ways to Support Employees in Stressful Times

As a manager, you have both the power and the responsibility to see your employees through stressful and uncertain times. Here are 11 ways you can help—starting today!

1. Shut down rumor mill. Fear reigns during difficult economic environments. Right now your employees are speculating, gossiping, expressing their fears to each another, reading negative headlines and hearing tales of downsizing from friends and neighbors.

Don't allow a culture of paranoia to add to employee stress. Squelch rumors and misinformation immediately and be as frank with your employees as possible, including admitting to uncertainty if you don't have immediate answers.

2. Be positive and upbeat. Even in bad environments there are nuggets of good news to focus on. Build up your employees. Right now, they need it.

Never use distressing economic conditions as a whip to drive employees harder. You may see temporary gains, but over the long term this will have the opposite effect of lowered productivity, loyalty, and morale. You are also likely see your health care costs rise as stressed employees begin experiencing work-related health problems.

3. Remove roadblocks. Employees being forced to do more with less may feel overwhelmed and victimized. Positive reinforcement and feedback empowers employees to take on more. Intervene early and often when "the system" or bureaucracy (the part you can control) becomes an impediment to success.

4. Focus on helping employees improve time management. Increased workloads and responsibility can cause paralysis in otherwise reliable, productive employees. Set clear expectations and be proactive about prioritizing.

5. Use non-monetary rewards when budgets are tight. Let a hard worker knock off a couple hours early on a nice Friday afternoon (make it a surprise*) or give away a coveted parking space to an outstanding performer. Be sure to praise sincerely and publicly for a job well done.

6. Allow some time during the day for socializing and blowing off steam. Be the initiator. Employees know it's okay when the boss does it first.

*2014, August: See the Washington Post reported research on how important surprises can be to making life happier. http://bit.ly/wez-001

7. Tailor your interactions to each employee's unique personality and interests. Now is your opportunity to delve deeper and get to know each individual on a more personal level (short of involving yourself in personal problems.) The better you know them, the more you'll know how to help them succeed in challenging times.

8. Add calming foods to your office/work kitchen. Diet has a big impact on mood. Let employees reach for foods high in complex carbohydrates or vitamin B6 like green tea, chocolate, bananas, yogurt, and whole grain products.

9. Brighten your interior. A fresh coat of light colored paint can do wonders for the office mood. Arrange furniture so that it's comfortable, inviting, and encourages face-to-face interaction.

10. Encourage employees to personalize their space. Downsizing and cutbacks are sometimes necessary, but the impersonal nature of them can crush staff morale. Allowing employees to "own" their space restores their identities and gives them some measure of control over their environment.

11. Build a culture of teamwork. Show that you're serious by rewarding teamwork and fiercely discouraging cut-throat tactics against fellow workers. Adopt a "We're good enough to overcome this!" attitude that emphasizes group goals.

When They Win, You Win

High staff morale means higher productivity and less absenteeism. Congratulations! Now you've turned workplace stress and limited resources into a positive feedback loop that allows you to survive and thrive in today's difficult environment.