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8 TIPS TO HELP YOUR EMPLOYEES COPE WITH CHANGE

BY CAMILLE MACCHIO

IN AN ERA WHERE A FIRM LIKE LEHMAN BROTHERS CAN GO BANKRUPT almost overnight and the Dow's fluctuations can make one dizzy, fear—even panic—has become a fixture in the office. The pain of job loss is hitting hard and isn't likely to end soon. Employees who lose their jobs face great stress; those who remain employed often suffer from “survivor sickness” and struggle with dramatic changes.

One of the most traumatic changes an organization and its people can go through is a reorganization paired with layoffs. Change means stepping into the unknown. It means giving up established ways of being and doing. Change means risk, turbulence and, often, conflict. In organizations, change pushes whole groups of people to think and feel differently, and if open, honest communication takes second or third place to the change occurring, whole groups of people lack the ability to adapt, be productive and to manage change successfully.

Managers face a daunting task. To help their organizations weather a downturn, they need to ensure that employees fully buy into change initiatives and make the necessary alterations in their day-to-day behavior at precisely the same time the employees are likely to be most anxious about, and resistant to, change.

TOWARD HOPE & ACTION

Helping the staff support and understand the change taking place starts with understanding the emotions that change produces in employees, such as fear, anxiety, resistance, low morale, negativity and more. Here are some suggestions for managers to help employees move from anxiety and resistance to hope and action:

1. Interpret events for employees. The most powerful thing you as a manager can do is to interpret what's going on for people and explain what it means for them in specific, concrete terms. For example, if your company or industry has been in the news, and there are media reports about lackluster performance, explain what the news reports mean specifically for your employees. Obviously, you can't predict the future, but you can provide information as to what you do know. Some areas for cost cutting also can be identified.

2. Lay out a plan in clear terms. Let employees know how you intend to update them as changes take place. Will you call a special

meeting each week to update them on the change? Send out a weekly e-mail? People need reassurance that their leaders are actively involved in the change, that they know what they're doing, and that expectations will be made clear.

3. Whenever you can, explain the rationale behind decisions that will affect your team. In fact, whenever you see a chance to lessen uncertainty and increase understanding, take it. Uncertainty feeds anxiety; knowledge calms it.

4. Acknowledge the emotional roller coaster. Throughout the change process, accept that people can experience wildly conflicting emotions at every stage. Even within one individual, sadness over abandoning long-held ways of doing business may compete with excitement about a new and possibly better direction for the firm.

5. Let people know that a roller coaster of emotions is normal. People who experience this phenomenon are not less talented or less valued because of it.

6. Stay connected. Some senior managers make only rare appearances in their organizations. That's a recipe for disaster when a company is making a change during tough times.

7. This is not the time for managers to be remote. No matter how busy you are, carve out time to be visible and available to your team, answer people's questions, and gather information on how employees are handling the change. This will help you find out where resistance is brewing before it boils over.

8. Make connectedness and communication imperatives for the managers who report to you.

If there's any silver lining in the dark cloud now hanging over the economy, it's that no industry or organization is disproportionately affected. And all companies have the same opportunity to reinvent themselves in the face of immense challenge. ○

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