

Power Up Productivity in Down Times

By Eric Smith

The President's first 100 days are over; changes made, hope hanging, and the economy's recovery with a real business rebound seeming far away. On top of this, there's a surplus of trepidation in the workplace. Slips in productivity may have managers snipping, with the rest of the staff covering their moves, just in case . . . of layoffs. Service, morale, basic performance may be suffering, yet, how do you get beyond the anxiety, uncertainty and missteps to the reality of keeping the business afloat, even profitable?

There is a fundamental, quietly occurring change in organizations today. It is a critical wake up call that many of the traditional methods of motivating employees through directing, forcing and demanding are no longer working. Tantamount to this is a change away from the old approach that seeks to raise levels of performance through the use of carrots and sticks --- that no longer get results --- toward leading the business by deliberately looking to people's stores of yet-to-be-harnessed talent and energy. People motivation and the decisive application of their talent represent one of the most powerful yet overlooked frontiers of business.

Remember those bright people who were so engaging in their interviews? Re-igniting their spark will help uncover the potential you saw when you hired them. Especially in tough times, many people are overstressed and their talents lie sleeping, hiding, exhausted or are just simply 'withdrawn' from daily work life engagement. The standard "putting up with what ya' got" attempts to extract results must be replaced with the practice of generating sincere, meaningful change through refocused personal and collective contribution. The key here is learning how to stop dancing around people's behavior and to begin harnessing the energy beneath it.

If you desire to power up productivity in down times, then work at creating opportunities which help your people to step back, reflect and thoughtfully engage on timely business issues. Venues can be as elaborate as an off-site retreat, as simple as time spent in the conference room, or as powerful as focusing collectively to establish alignment around common direction. Afford people the time and space and skill set to feel safe to think, speak and purposefully interact with one another. This sense of safety and their capability to interact is essential to bringing forth the ideas that will infuse your business. Next get folks to attend to both their regular operational tasks --- the daily working IN the business --- and the oft missed but immensely important practice of organizational improvement --- the working ON the business. This is to say, fundamentally, leaders must shift their attention and influence to improving, not just 'running' their businesses.

For example, for quick and positive returns, start practicing professional development, team learning, and process improvement. As management gains facility with these approaches, fresh ideas, renewed relationships and rekindled commitment emerge. Often, breakthrough changes in engagement, alignment and productivity ensue. The end result of this is significant personal growth, stronger, more resilient teams, and superior organizational performance.

Eric Smith is President of TeamWorks International a management consulting firm headquartered in Sacramento, California. TeamWorks is nationally recognized for its work in team productivity and the people engagement side of organizational turnaround, breakthrough and performance. www.GetTeamWorks.com