

MAXIMIZING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT BRANDING AND CREATING A HIGHLY ENGAGED WORKFORCE

They say that adversity shows one's true character; how an organization treats its employees in tough times will be remembered for many years as a reflection of the organization's 'true self'. In economic down times there is an urgency around creating a compelling employment brand that is not always understood. There is no better time to capitalize on this exciting opportunity for companies to create a long term boost to their brand equity and improve employee engagement even while, on the surface, economic conditions are getting worse.

Say The Right Thing

An economic downturn may well mean layoffs, stock options sliding under water, salary increments becoming negligible, perquisites being cut and interesting projects being starved for funds or put on hold indefinitely. The list of unpleasanties can go on. Things really are getting worse for employees; so how can we create a positive environment to en-

sure that productivity and performance are at the levels required to contribute to the bottom line.

The first thing organizations must do is manage expectations. If employees are naively expecting that salary increments will be unaffected by the downturn then they may be in for a nasty shock. Top management needs to be aware that employees often have little clue about the true financial state of the organization and this needs to be corrected. Organizations need a significant, on-going communication effort to manage employees' expectations. If these skills don't exist in-house an HR consulting group can help.

However, there is a risk in communication. If you tell employees things are worse than they really are then you risk losing trust. The only solution is to stick to the truth and give as much information as you can. You must be forthright in acknowledging what you don't know and on occasion what you do know but are not at liberty to say.

Even in honesty there are risks. Stressed out managers facing an uncertain economic reality may think this is an excuse to present information in an overly pessimistic way. Honest but poorly handled communication can damage morale and productivity. The goal is to present the truth, but in a way that encourages and empowers employees to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

All this means is that HR has to shift resources into communication and in teaching managers how to communicate effectively. Handling communication well is an inexpensive but highly effective way to maintain engagement. Don't neglect external communications either. People in the talent pools you most value need to know your organization treats people fairly in tough times; it's a great way to build the employment brand.

Do The Right Thing

When an organization realizes how critical communication is it is important to keep in mind that not everything is doom and gloom—they had better have some good and positive things to communicate. The company has to do and say the right things.

Doing the right thing means layoffs should be used only as a last resort and must be handled fairly and compassionately. When an organization scrupulously lives its values then communication that builds morale is relatively easy to do.

HR has a big job to do in managing up. Powerful figures like the CFO will have their eye on financial capital and may completely overlook human capital. HR has to continually remind, convince and cajole the top management to recognize that doing the right things in the right way will pay big dividends, and that neglecting the human element will do lasting and often irreversible damage to the organization.



Detect And Act

The next step is detecting issues that impact engagement and employment brand through employee surveys, focus groups, and exit interviews. HR consulting groups can help with the planning and execution of all of these information gathering processes.

Detection should not be seen simply as problem identification; it should include detection of what's going right as well as what's going wrong. Finding out what is going right and building on that is exactly what you need to fuel a positive communications campaign that keeps employees upbeat.

Of course, detection is worthless without action. It's important that the process for analyzing your findings then determining what action steps will be taken and who will be accountable is established in advance of any survey or focus group. HR departments have traditionally been good at detection but poor at summarizing and creating opportunities for change then handing off accountability for action to managers. An HR consulting group can play a big role in ensuring information gets turned into action.

One Person At A Time

While HR generally deals with enterprise wide processes and programs, creating employee engagement really comes down to how you treat each individual. What matters to Maria may not matter to Martin. This is the place where individual managers need to step up and be good leaders of people. They need to be visible, they need to spend more time in face-to-face conversations, and they have to listen to each individual rather than assume they already know what makes that person tick. HR's job is to remind managers of these fundamental aspects of leadership and explain why these actions are so important for creating and maintaining engagement through tough times.

Seizing The Opportunity

HR leadership should be approaching the downturn with a sense that there is a great opportunity to be seized. Economic troubles present an unparalleled chance to do the right things in a way that will have an enduring impact on employee engagement and create strong and high recognizable employment brand. It is simply a matter of diligently following good HR practice: communicating, treating people with respect, listening and responding. It's a small investment that can have significant and measurable returns.

