

MAINTAINING GOOD WORKPLACE MORALE IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

There is, and has been for the past two years, considerable national preoccupation with the downturn in the economy and it seems to be the only subject that is dominating the national conversation. The uncertainty in the economy is pervasive and understandably employees are nervous and stressed; it seems no one is immune to the effects of this crisis. The media have whipped up hysteria; with unrestrained and sensationalised analysis of bankruptcy and bail out. It is difficult to ignore the signs that there is huge uncertainty surrounding the economy. The negative preoccupation is self-perpetuating, leading to even more panic- a run on the morale bank!

While everyone understands that businesses need to remain viable in order to retain their employees, and that there are very capable people in all industry sectors who will lose their jobs, focusing too heavily on those facts can cripple existing staff to the point where their work productivity is negatively impacted. When staff see jobs being cut indiscriminately, and without 'just cause' this will no doubt give rise to trench mentality and threading water.

Creativity is required when the budget is tight and increasing salaries is not an option. Also, strong and courageous leadership is required. Management must step up and lead by example. It is said that individuals do not leave companies – they leave poor managers. Bad managers or management structure leads to poor morale or at the other end of the spectrum- stress related claims or long term absences affecting the bottom line.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROTECTING MORALE:

- **Prohibit office gossip** – such as a sign in a prominent position warning- “Talk of recession is strictly prohibited”. Lighthearted but a serious message cut out the morbidity.
- **Be Honest** - Let employees know the state of the company. It is critical that employers are honest about the company's financial situation. If business is good, discuss new projects and contracts. If it's not so good, focus on the integrity of the company and its management. – vast majority of employees would happily remain at their current positions, even if it were for less income, if they felt they were receiving appropriate recognition and could achieve work-life balance.
- **Motivate** – create a spirit of ownership among employees which will be infectious. Offer, for example, a valuable prize, perhaps in the form of a sizable one-time bonus, to the best performer for achievement of a particular goal.
- **Let employees know you care.** Basic enquiries as to how they are holding up – empathise!

- **Training.** We know budgets are tight but there are some very cost effective training seminars that don't require travel time or expense. Look locally for a good ½ day or 1 day seminar and send your employees to it. Employment Clinic can structure these for you; check our website www.employmentclinic.ie for more details. By supplying training it not only does it show that you value their growth as an employee, it gives them a chance to be with each other, outside of the office and can be used as a really great morale booster. It's also a great return on a minimal investment.
- **Focus on employee health** – Take the focus away from work and switch to lifestyle. Offer discounts for health centre or lunch vouchers, doctor visits etc
- **Flexible work schedule** – flexi time encouraging employees to spend more time with family a happy employee is a productive one!

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