

Engaging Employees in a Down Economy

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Impact of Economy

The dramatic change in the world economy has had an impact on the bank accounts of most industries and sent shock waves through the workforce, for leaders knowing how to lead during challenging times is crucial to survival. Emerging from the era of prosperity, leaders may lack the skills to know what steps to take while managing during the current down economy.

Focus On Employees

Leaders looking at their financial performance need not lose sight of the importance of investment in their human capital. Leaders may be quick to look to “quick fixes” in relation to the human side of their business by not investing in employee growth and development and cutting back on resources allocated to human resources. There is no more critical time to invest in human capital. Human resources professionals must “be at the table” to offer solutions to executive leadership during the down turn of the economy. Executive leadership may need to “retool” some of their initiatives during this time. Some steps to consider include:

- Develop leadership in key skills needed to lead in a down economy.
- Assess the work climate to measure the impact any specific cut backs have had on the workforce.
- Design retention plans that focus on employee engagement.
- Review performance management systems to be sure peak performers are identified and rewarded.
- Communicate beyond employees’ highest expectations on the future of the business, the economy and how the employees fit into the big picture.
- Involve employees in finding solutions to financial challenges.
- Encourage use of EAP and work life balance initiatives.
- Assess all communications to be sure they are employee and customer focused.

- Set expectations and leadership standards that are linked to employee engagement.
- Assess the effectiveness of department leadership, especially as it relates to communication, employee engagement, and employee involvement.

Engage Employees

In recent years, employers have been increasingly more interested in employee engagement, but they need to be sure to keep this focus in the current economy and not lose sight of the importance of an engaged work force and the impact it has on their business. Research has shown that engaged employees produce at a higher level, operate in a safer environment, provide better customer service and are less likely to leave the organization. Factors affecting engagement include the following:

- Growth and development opportunities
- Responsiveness and support for employee needs
- Relationship with leadership at the work unit level
- Sociability of the work environment
- Sense of importance to the mission of the organization
- View of the workplace as a good place to work
- Feeling appreciated for work
- Supplies and equipment to do excellent work

Seek Answers

Recognizing the answers are not simple and finding answers to these questions must begin with gathering current data from the work place, especially at the work unit level. Using a survey, an organization can tailor inquiries to address specific organizational issues while benchmarking to a database. In order to gather useful data, efforts must occur to analyze the organizational culture to be sure inquiries are relevant. Definitely in engagement surveying, the “one size fits all” approach is not the answer. Based on the type of healthcare organization, from a tertiary care teaching facility to a rural community hospital with 60 beds, the needs of the staff vary greatly.

Ask the Right Questions

Research also indicates that employee engagement varies by industry, culture, country, age and many other factors that may be unique to the particular industry. Of course research has supported some common threads to what engages employees. With this in mind, after assessing the work climate, leadership needs to ask the following questions about their organization and how they are viewed by leadership and employees alike:

1. Are we recruiting and retaining staff with engagement in mind?
2. How are compensation / benefits linked to engagement?
3. Does the performance management system reinforce engagement?
4. Is the organization viewed as a learning organization?
5. Is engagement seen as important to the culture?
6. Are goals and objectives linked to engagement?
7. Do policies and procedures promote engagement?
8. Is there open communication between all levels of leadership and employees?
9. Is leadership development focused on knowledge and skills that support engagement?
10. Do our leaders exemplify the following?
 - Create a supportive environment
 - Manage leadership relationships
 - Provide feedback regularly to all
 - Create a learning environment
 - Senior Leaders lead by example
 - Involve employees
 - Focus on work life balance/employee well-being
11. Do we regularly monitor all metrics linked to engagement, not just the survey scores?
12. Do we take action on survey results and focus on areas with lower engagement metrics?
13. Are leaders held accountable and rewarded for leadership metrics?
14. Do we provide the resources, equipment, supplies, facility environment to encourage engagement?

Set the Course to Retain Talent

As leadership makes strategic plans, they strive to make best use of their financial resources. At the same time, they work to meet the needs of their staff in order to gain their support and commitment on future initiatives. Providing every day quality patient care delivered in the most effective and efficient manner while caring for the patients with courtesy and compassion is essential for success.



The driving motivation for leadership in healthcare organizations is to retain the dedicated healthcare employees who will operate as strategic partners in facing the many challenges of providing healthcare in such a volatile economic environment. In order to help achieve this, the best advice for a course of action is to survey employees on a regular basis and most importantly act on survey results.

Today's healthcare market is continually evolving through use of technology, consumer driven healthcare, economic concerns, governmental involvement, and change initiated by multiple entities outside of healthcare. The aging population continues to have a strong impact on healthcare as well.

Only through well-planned and executed surveying can healthcare leadership best determine where to spend their time and energy in meeting today's workforce expectations. Leaders must ask the tough questions of their organization and take action to ensure their organization is engaging employees, and in turn meeting the needs of their customers in the most cost effective manner possible - remembering human capital is a key component in the equation.

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