

Keeping Up in a Down Economy

by Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

Potential Interview Questions (and sample Answers)

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: An economic recession is a scary thing. And while the financial headlines ring out loud and clear, it's important to remember that the real toll of the recession is its impact on everyday people: those who have lost their jobs, benefits or wages as well as those who are concerned about losing those things -- which is just about everybody else.

I wrote *Keeping Up in a Down Economy* to teach managers about the positive things they can do to motivate employees in any work environment and impact an organization's success in difficult times. There is a difference between stress and excitement, and what separates the two is *control*. Negative circumstances you cannot control lead to stress; negative circumstances you can control are opportunities for excitement.

So, managers need to better focus on those things that can make a direct, positive impact with their employees. By concentrating on those things, managers can help buffer employees from the negative impact of the economy, inspire them so they see the opportunities that exist in these uncertain times, and help channel their energy to achieve better results.

Q: It's not surprising that recessionary times impact employee morale. How does that lead to other problems at work today?

A: In difficult times not only are employees worried about keeping their job, they are also very concerned about their personal finances and future --- causing heightened levels of stress, anxiety and fear. Left unchecked, these concerns lead to declining morale, lower performance, eroding trust, and loss of productivity.

According to Quantum Workplace, a company that tracks employee engagement scores of over 1.5 million employees within 5,000 companies nationwide, 66% of firms they studied during the recent recession saw a decrease in employee engagement. And, the 2009/2010 U.S. Strategic Rewards Survey by WorldatWork found that employee engagement levels have dropped 9% since last year, and close to 25% for top performers. Given the direct impact of employee engagement on a company's bottom line, these statistics are very significant, especially in that currently 45% of all employees report they plan to find a new job as the economy improves. Long story short: You need to take care of employees NOW or risk a much worse situation later.

Q: So, what are some things that best-practice companies are doing to keep their employees engaged during these challenging times?

A: This question was the driving force for the book. To answer it, I examined management practices at companies where employee engagement scores have increased during the current recession and compared that to organizations whose scores nosedived over a comparable period. Based on this research, I identified six clear dimensions that any manager or organization can implement to create a more motivating work environment for their employees today:

- Create a Clear and Compelling Direction
- Direct, Open and Honest Communication
- Involve Employees and Encourage Initiative
- Increase Employee Autonomy, Flexibility and Support
- Continued Focus on Career Growth and Development
- Recognize and Reward High Performance

Q: Much of your work has focused on simple, low-cost ways for managers and employers to make a difference. In these trying economic times, this message is more important than ever. What are some simple, inexpensive actions managers can take to keep their employees inspired and engaged?

A: The list of ideas is bound only by a manager's creativity. Here are a few low-cost, morale-boosting ideas that have recently worked well for companies:

- Establish a 24-hour "news desk" on the company Intranet for employees, constantly updated with the latest company news.
- Ask employees for their ideas or allow them to organize teams to focus on cost-saving ideas, process improvements, customer service issues, etc
- Encourage managers to write sincere, thank-you notes to their employees for jobs well done, rather than giving cash.
- Allow a reduction of working hours rather than a layoff; offer to "redeploy" employees to lesser paying jobs, rather than a lay them off
- Replace expensive catered lunches with brown bag lunches prepared by managers; use the time to address issues important to employees.
- Look for those opportunities that employees can grow and learn new skills while helping to get needed work done
- Schedule a team-building activity, allowing employees to decide what the group would do; make sure to have it be fun for everyone.
- Use time off as a reward for high performers, whether it's an afternoon or an extra personal day; if you can't give a raise, give more time off
- Encourage workers to take their vacation time and maintain a better work-life balance.
- To lessen economic anxiety, create (or bring in a speaker to address) money management or retirement workshops for employees.

Q: The book is peppered with discussions around common mistakes managers make. Are there a few you believe bubble to the surface? Ones that managers really need to avoid making?

A: Yes. 46% of employees believe management treats them with disrespect, 63% say that decisions in their company are usually not made at the appropriate level, 52% do not feel free to voice their opinions openly, 43% say their good work goes unrecognized and 53% say their boss doesn't personally motivate them. These issues can all be relatively easily addressed by one's manager who shouldn't simply believe that their employees are lucky to have a job. Sure, most people surviving layoffs are thankful for their jobs, but this feeling alone is hardly enough to motivate them to be more proactive in doing their best work now.

Q: If managers could focus on only one thing right now to engage their employees what should it be?

A: Now, more than ever, managers need to give employees permission and encouragement to be part of the solution. I believe that every employee has a \$50,000 idea; managers need to be proactive in getting that idea out of them. Encouraging employees to make suggestions and take initiative starts with communication. Once employees are armed with frequent, open, and honest communication, they are more likely to act on that information in positive ways. For instance, Texas Commerce Bank held focus groups with employees to determine what procedures most frustrated employees and customers. Using the feedback, the company nearly doubled its \$50 million cost-savings goal.

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