



‘Now, more than ever, managers need to give employees permission and encouragement to be part of the solution.’

BOB NELSON, AUTHOR OF ‘KEEPING UP IN A DOWN ECONOMY,’ TALKS ABOUT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Q *Is there anything companies can learn from past recessions?*

A: Looking at past recessions is a very positive story. Many of today’s most successful companies started or grew substantially during the Great Depression and every recession since then. GE, Disney, P&G, Kellogg, Chevrolet and virtually all the large airlines bucked the trend and started during the Depression. At the height of the recession of the early 1980’s, IBM led the crusade to introduce the PC that would become a milestone for the company and the industry. When the big car companies were busy laying off workers during the recessionary times from 2000 to 2003, Toyota expanded operations and emerged with a higher market share. Even now when everyone else seems to be retrenching or cutting back, AT&T recently announced the \$1.2 billion purchase of two companies in an aggressive signal that they were not going to let the current downturn prevent them from growing.

What sets these leading companies apart is that they didn’t close down and wait for the economy to come back. Each company decided to do things differently, and successfully communicated and implemented that approach with their employees. Whether your company has 3,000 employees or three, like these companies you can look for opportunities and excel in challenging times.

Q: *So, what are some things these and other 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 variances in management practices between companies whose employee engagement scores have increased dramatically during the current recession and 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
- A number of organizations allowed their employees (not just management) to run cost-cutting programs.

Q: *Much of your work has focused on simple, low cost ways for 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 some low-cost, morale-boosting ideas that have recently worked well for companies:

- Establish a 24-hour “news desk” on its company Intranet that was constantly updated with the latest company news for its employees to check.
- Encourage managers to write sincere, handwritten thank-you notes to their employees rather than giving cash.
- Replace expensive catered lunches with brown bag lunches prepared by managers.
- To lessen economic anxiety, create money management courses for employees to take.
- To forget about the gloom and doom, encourage employees to organize fundraisers for the less fortunate.
- Encourage workers to take their vacation time and maintain a better work-life balance.

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 bringing it 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 ways that will help the organization. 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.

Q: *The book is peppered with discussions around 26 common mistakes managers make. Are there a few you believe bubble to the surface? Ones that managers really need to avoid making?*

A: Managers need to be cognizant of these common mistakes and strive not to make them. That said, there are a few that warrant special attention. One of the worst mistakes managers today can make is to assume that recognizing their workers is not as important now as when unemployment is low. Managers shouldn't believe that their employees simply feel lucky to have a job and therefore don't need additional encouragement. Sure, most people surviving layoffs are thankful for their jobs, but this feeling is hardly enough to motivate them to do their best work.

Don't think your staff cannot handle the truth. Talking openly about a downturn can help people feel they have some measure of control over the situation. What happened last time business was slow? How did the company turn things around? Along with making employees feel more included, managers that explore these questions are also likely to get some very helpful ideas.

Managers also need to keep their focus from the front lines. Because customer service is paramount when times are tough, managers need to do everything possible to make sure those who are the first point of contact with their company are sending the right message. If these employees come across as being indifferent or inexperienced, you could lose both prospective and existing customers.

Q: *How did you get into motivational speaking?*

A: I realized that it was an important part of getting the word out about things I believed in—the research I conducted and the books I wrote to relay that information.

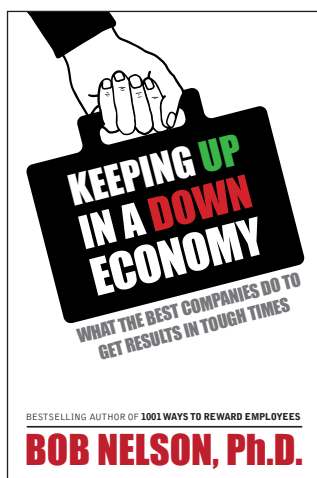
Q: *Why is having a cool place to work so important?*

A: Work needs to be fun and everyone doing it needs to be excited about at least some as-

pect of what they are doing. Without that, time drags, resentment rises, stress builds and even little things become frustrating & upsetting.

Q: *Is this especially important during these tough economic times?*

A: Yes it is! If the circumstances surrounding us are inherently negative, we each have to do more in our spheres of influence to emphasize the positive, that is, control those things you can and minimize or ignore those things you can't control. I like to use the analogy that the driver of a car never gets motion sickness because they control the situation: see where they are going, control how fast they get there, how hard they turn on curves, etc. By asserting more control in your work environment (making a suggestion, helping a team member, volunteering for a project, having a positive & fun attitude) you influence the workplace for yourself and others you work with.



Q: *Managers often cite budget limitations for lack of rewarding employees? Are there non-monetary ways?*

A: Well, yes there are, in fact, one of the books I authored is called *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, which actually has about 2500 real-life examples of positive consequences from companies across the country of all sizes and industries. Hands down, the best ideas that employees most value tend to be ones with little or no costs associated.

Q: *You've noted a change in the way newer generations think about work. What can employers do to accommodate this?*

A: Meet them at their energy. Get them involved, ask for their ideas and suggestions and encourage them to pursue their ideas for improving things. Notice them when they've done a good job, because they will notice it if you do not! Don't evaluate them based upon values from a previous generation, but rather



focus on the positive things they bring to the workplace such as an incredible resourcefulness, ease with technology, strong social bonds and desire to be an integral part of a team. If they have a high preference for frequent feedback, realize that it's not because they are insecure as much as they have learned that in dynamic, changing times (ie, now) the need for constant feedback is critical to validate what is working well so they can better focus on those things.

Q: *What's the most important thing to look when talking about employee satisfaction?*

A: Employee satisfaction in an "internal construct," that is, it comes from within each person so you can't assume you know what someone else will find motivating. You have to ask them and accept what they share as being valid for them, trying to provide those things as their performance warrants it. Performance and satisfaction go hand in hand, in fact, people who perform well tend to feel great about themselves, where they work, who they work for and who they work with. Help employees be performers and they'll love working for you and your company!

Q: *How many books have you sold?*

A: 3.5 million.

Q: *Age?*

A: 53