

## Maintaining Trust in Difficult Times

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**Trustworthy behavior provides significant benefit to organizations when times are good, and even more benefit when times are difficult, as they are now. Trustworthy behavior is the glue that holds a group of people together, keeps people contributing for the betterment of all, allows creative ideas to flow, and keeps people's spirits up when facing challenges.**

There are a few specific actions that leaders and managers can take to insure that their peers, and the larger group of employees in the organization, all work together to get through the next several months.

### **1) Involve People**

First, it is important to remember that everyone is aware of what's going on, everyone is vulnerable, and some people will be harmed significantly by a job loss or decrease in hours. To mitigate the impact of job changes, involve employees in developing the strategies you seek to implement. Employees may come up with creative ideas for staffing changes – rotating unpaid days off, taking unpaid leave, reducing hours – or may be open to early retirement packages that could prevent layoffs. When people are involved in addressing difficult situations not only are you able to gain from their creative ideas, but you also give people a portion of control over what is happening to them. A sense of loss of control is one of the most harmful aspects of difficult situations – harmful to people's health and harmful to the camaraderie and commitment of the group.

### **2) Share information broadly and consistently**

Everyone in your organization is already talking about what's happening. The grapevine and rumor mill are in high gear. People will create their own answers to questions if they do not receive enough information or inconsistent information from leaders. Therefore it is of great importance to let people know on a regular basis what is happening in your business and industry. As a leader or manager it is singularly important that you be seen as a source of information about what steps are being taken to address the current situation. Even when full answers to questions can't be given – many of us don't know right now exactly what will happen next week or next month – letting people know what you are doing to stay on top of the situation is very important.

### **3) Show up, be available, say thank you**

Leaders and managers can help to convey a sense of confidence that the difficult times facing the organization are being addressed simply by making themselves available and being visible. This is definitely a time to visit people at their desks, in the factory or in the call center or sales room. Listen to what people are saying and answer with the information that you have. Let people know what you are doing, how you are keeping yourself informed. And let people know that you appreciate their contributions and hard work. 'Thank you' is one of the most powerful ways of showing appreciation.

#### **4) Start with yourself**

If cuts need to be made, leaders and managers need to be the first ones to make changes in their own pay. Generally hours do not get reduced for leaders during difficult times, yet reduced salaries can have a tremendous impact on the perception among employees that 'we are all in this together'. And the salary savings from reductions for the highest paid employees can have a more significant impact than cuts made among the lowest paid employees. The benefit that leaders and managers will receive back from this act of going first will more than make up for any economic hardship that might be experienced. Leading by example is truly worth its weight in gold.

#### **5) Layoffs as a last resort**

Decisions about layoffs are some of the most painful ones to make for caring leaders. Yet after everything else has been tried, sometimes layoffs are necessary. Many of the 100 Best Companies have, during difficult times, had to resort to layoffs to serve the best interests of the organization. If that is the situation facing your organization, challenge yourself first to see if there is anything else that can be done before layoffs. Have people's hours been reduced, has unpaid leave been offered, have some people taken early retirement? If all of this has been tried, then layoffs may simply need to happen. Let people know everything that has been done to avoid this situation, let people know the strategy considerations, and then proceed with layoffs with humanity and justice. Share with people as much information as you can about how those being laid off will be supported, what the severance packages are, what kind of career or other assistance will be provided. Remember as well to pay attention to the employees who stay. Much has been written about 'survivor guilt' for those who make it through a layoff. Keep people engaged and remind everyone that the sooner the economy recovers and businesses are on solid financial ground, the sooner everyone will be able to return to work.

**Difficult financial times are a challenge for everyone. When people trust their leaders and work together to find a solution the choices available will be greater, and the cooperation and commitment that come from high levels of trust will fuel a collective effort to succeed.**