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How to Keep Fear From Paralyzing Your Team

Five Things Managers Can Do to Maintain Productivity in an Uncertain Economy

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In today's broken economy, troubled by the threat of layoffs, employees are reeling from a sense of powerlessness and, in turn, fear. But that fear isn't necessarily pushing them to work harder. Fear can be paralyzing, leading to lowered productivity. If, as a manager, you are not communicating about your business and people are worried about losing their jobs, well, that is about as un motivating as it gets. Afraid and seeking safer havens, employees detach from their current jobs -- both physically for interviews and emotionally. Those distractions keep them from doing their jobs as well as possible.

The challenge for managers, then, becomes lessening fear and maintaining productivity by clearly communicating what's happening at a business level and getting involved. Success depends upon managers motivating teams to perform at a higher level than a year ago.

Here are some ways you can keep your team from becoming paralyzed by that productivity killer known as fear.

1. Stay positive. As a leader, it is important to realize that you are going to feel internal pressures more than your team. Regardless of the pressure you are feeling, it is important for you to maintain the buffer between your team and the people to whom you report. Don't let negativity continue to roll downhill to your team.

2. Help where you can. While you may not be giving bonuses or merit increases this year, you will likely have to ask your team to do more and be more productive with fewer resources. Let your team know you understand the pressure they are under and take busy work off their desks, enabling them to focus on areas that will have tangible, shorter-term results.

3. Remember your manners. It's more important now than ever to say "please" and "thank you." Appreciate the extra mile people go to get their work done, and let people know they are doing a great job. Write a note of thanks. Buy someone lunch. Most of all, remember to "praise publicly and punish privately."

4. Be a resource. Give your team access to you more often. Keep your door open for them to talk with you about their challenges and fears. They are likely nervous about other elements in their lives, and your understanding will comfort them. Give your team resources to do their jobs better. Bring in trainers or do internal training to improve their performance and reinforce good habits. Fear, uncertainty and doubt will paralyze a team. Give them the ability to voice their concerns either anonymously, one-on-one or in a regular meeting. Listening to those concerns will help you tailor your strategy to the areas of greatest concern. Closed-door sessions and strange people on the floor can give your team reasons to be concerned -- and their fears are likely worse than the reality of the situation.

5. Be honest. Honesty does not mean telling your team everything, but it does mean understanding what information should be shared and what should be kept confidential. As much as possible, create an open environment that will ease their fears. If you have a weekly meeting, include discussion about the reality of the business. Make sure they know you and they are in the same boat. If there have been layoffs, acknowledge them, and acknowledge the pain layoffs cause even to those who are left behind. If there are budget cuts coming, prepare your team.

Remember, these times present challenges to you that aren't all shared by your team. Motivation may be harder to maintain in a time of crisis, but if you put in the effort by using these guidelines, staying positive and alleviating fear, you'll be rewarded by emerging on the other side of the recession with a team that is ready to succeed and grateful for your leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Lundwall is a founding and managing partner of Mercury Group, a retained consultancy that specializes in media and media/technology companies. Jeff has worked in those industries for more than 13 years. He helped launch The Industry Standard, the first business magazine for the internet. He later founded three content sites, where he managed sales and business development. Most recently, he was associate publisher at CondeNet.