Engaging Employees during Times of Uncertainty

A Dale Carnegie® White Paper

By
Kevin J. Sensenig, Ph.D., RODP
Global Brand Champion
Hauppauge, NY

The current period of economic uncertainty is providing both opportunities and challenges to the work environment in organizations around the globe. Some employees have been through this type of turbulence previously in their career. Others will be experiencing this upheaval for the first time. While there are many general ideas being discussed about how to weather the current storm, it is important that organizations, managers, and employees gear up for the human aspect of the current environment. This may be a time of uncertainty, concern, and even fear for those who are not sure what to expect. Even for seasoned veterans of organization change, the uncertainty of the current period may be somewhat unsettling.

So how do organizations, senior leaders, managers, and employees create an engaging environment during this time of turbulence? What are some key steps that can be followed to deal with the uncertainty effectively? What can leaders do to keep employees engaged during the ups and downs of the current economy? What can employees do to cope with the uncertainty most effectively? This Dale Carnegie® white paper addresses these important questions.
Before we look at how to create an engaging environment, let’s consider why employee engagement during times of turbulence is so important.

According to Lockwood (2007), employees with the highest level of commitment perform 20% better and are 87% less likely to leave the organization on their own. This shows a clear link between employee engagement and performance. In fact, two of the earlier studies on employee engagement conducted by Watson Wyatt found that “high commitment” organizations (those with loyal and dedicated employees) out-performed “low commitment” organizations by 47% in one study and 200% in another study. Not only have highly engaged employees been linked to higher levels of performance, they have also been linked to delivering more innovative solutions to situations and solving problems more effectively, Scarlett (2008). In a 2008 study by Blessing White, the following quote was enlightening:

“Engaged employees are not just committed. They are not just passionate or proud. They have a line-of-sight on their own future and on the organization’s mission and goals. They are “enthused” and “in gear” using their talents and discretionary effort to make a difference in their organization’s quest for sustainable success.”

Finding ways to create an engaging environment for your employees, and improve their commitment for continued strong performance, during the financial crisis can yield positive results for everyone in the short term and the long term.
Organization-Wide Engagement Efforts

It is widely accepted that motivation comes from within. This means that as much as leaders desire to motivate others, the ultimate motivation comes from within the other person. This is largely true of engagement as well. Employees are engaged because they have a sense of connectivity, and because they have the drive and desire to be a part of the organization. So what can leaders do at an organizational level to engage employees? They must create an engaging environment—one that lends itself to providing the tools and elements employees need to build a sense of commitment. Organizational leaders (from senior leaders through human resource professionals) must look at how they:

Focus on Vision and Mission

Times of uncertainty and change can have a large impact on the vision and mission of any organization or team. Unfortunately, times of turbulence also tend to be defined with much ambiguity and uncertainty. This is a time for organization leaders to dispel the uncertainty with clarity and direction. It is important to restate and clarify the current vision and mission of the organization. It is also a time to share insights as to what the new vision and mission of the organization may be as any changes unfold. This is not done to raise confusion, it is simply an opportunity to identify key elements of the organization plan and share alternative options that may result from adapting to current market changes. For example, discuss how the vision and mission of the organization may look if various market situations play out. This will allow employees to consider the implications of such changes and allow them to share their thoughts and ideas as to how the organization can strengthen the vision and mission and compete effectively in a new market environment.

Maintain Open Dialogue

Any period of uncertainty will produce rapidly changing information. Do not try to hide information from employees. Employees desire to know what is going on based on accurate information, not second-hand gossip. Take time to conduct regular communication sessions with the team as a whole. Share current information, clarify any misinformation, and if information is not available admit that it is unknown. Be willing to follow-up quickly as new information becomes available so employees build and hold trust in the information being shared from an organization level. If this trust is broken, engaging employees will become significantly more difficult.
**Willingly Adjust Your Perspective**

Times of change and turbulence can be trying for organizational leaders because their sense of stability is also being challenged. This is a time to admit honestly when information has changed and how such a change impacts the organization’s perspective of the situation. Do not be afraid of adjusting perspective based on new information. Share such changes in perspective clearly. This will build positive momentum with employees and add to the trust built with open communication. It will reinforce that the organization is adapting to changing information and considering the organization wide impact of such changes. If employees believe the organization is trying to hold on to the past, in light of a changing situation, they will be more concerned that such stubbornness may negatively impact them. They will become more challenging and combative, rather than supportive and interactive in addressing the change. Demonstrating adaptability throughout the change experience increases the organization’s ability to gain meaningful input from employees regarding how to improve and stabilize the organization during the transition.

**Show Appreciation for the Impact on Employees**

Change is also demanding on employees and it is important that the organization recognize this impact. Senior leaders often spend many hours creating an organization plan to deal with the changing economy. Too often these plans only focus on the organization impact (budgets, goals, resources) and fail to address the impact of the change on employees. Take this opportunity to engage employees by identifying how employees will contribute to the organization during and after the turbulence. Show a balance between organization goals and the people impact in your planning.
Clarify Expectations

Times of uncertainty can increase stress and distraction among employees. Too often they respond by performing less effectively, producing less work, and engaging in tangents (gossip, checking the internet, etc.). It is important to keep the organization as a whole focused on high levels of production. Do not allow performance standards to drop. Showing sensitivity to employee concerns should not be accompanied with reduced expectations. The work still needs to be done and the organization must still be productive. Encourage people to remain active and productive as it will reduce their fear, stress, and sense of distraction.

Provide Continuous Follow-up

Times of turbulence call for increased communication and interaction. Be sure to use multiple communication methods to spread information (i.e., in person meetings, organization wide addresses, email, voicemail, newsletters, etc.). Be sure to follow each communication with needed follow-up. If you promised additional information, provide it. If you didn’t have the answer to a question, find it and provide the answer. Provide managers with as much information as possible so they can be champions of decisions and changes to the strategic plan. Don’t allow them to get lost in the middle. They are a direct source for positive follow-up during the time of uncertainty as most employees have a higher level of trust in their manager than in the organization leadership as a whole.
Management-Directed Engagement Efforts

The concept of management level engagement efforts often gets lost in the idea of organization level engagement efforts. Certainly it is the leaders and managers who develop and execute the organization engagement plan discussed earlier. The key difference is that the organization engagement efforts are looked at from an organizational standpoint. The management engagement efforts are considered from a one-on-one and small team standpoint. So what can leaders do with their direct reports to keep them engaged during times of change and uncertainty? They can focus on things such as:

Vision

While it is important for the organization to clarify its overriding vision and mission during times of change, it is vitally important that each manager consider how their team contributes to that overall vision and mission. The economic downturn is an opportune time for each manager to explain to his or her team how vital their role is in the department. Managers must create an exciting picture of the future look of the department and team. They must share this vision with the team by explaining how each team member contributes to making the vision a reality. As each employee understands their vital role in the organization, in their department, and in their team, their sense of engagement will be bolstered.

Followership

The key role of any leader is to create supportive, loyal, and talented employees. This cannot be accomplished from a distance. Times of transition and change increase the need for managers to be visible and approachable. Employees want a manager who knows them (personally and professionally), who is willing to listen to them, and who is caring enough to take time to address their individual concerns. This is a critical time to walk around the office, make extra phone calls to off-site employees, and keep up to date on email. Employees who feel connected to their manager are more likely to feel engaged in the organization. Be sure to schedule time for keeping employees connected.
Communication

A key to building followership is to maintain open communication with all employees. Managers can do this with general conversation, by sharing organization level communications, and by spending time focusing employees on the work at hand. It is important that managers spend time discussing expectations, the value of an employee's role, and key measurements of success within the role with each employee. This will help employees stay on task (a critical factor in not allowing the current uncertainty to become overly distracting) and open up meaningful discussion about how the role may change as new plans unfold. Employees who are excited about what the future may hold, or how their role may change and evolve in the future, are more likely to stay engaged during this period of uncertain change.

Empowerment

Employees typically like to believe that their efforts contribute to something bigger than themselves. To help employees be empowered, contributing members of the team, take time to help them focus for results in support of mission achievement, grow their skills and abilities so they can continue to contribute in the future, and challenge them to find innovative ways of performing their role. This process will help them be productive today, plan for ways to continue being productive in the future, and help the organization as a whole find ways to improve effectiveness and efficiency—two things every organization need to focus on to stay competitive.
Employee-Centered Engagement Efforts

You may not always know the best tactics to employ in dealing with the current economic uncertainty. Rather than struggling on your own, consider these approaches to raising your own level of engagement.

**Stay connected with your manager**

Too often during times of uncertainty it is easy to become disconnected from your manager. It is precisely during these times that you need to find ways to connect with your manager. Do not alienate yourself out of fear, or concern for your role. Rather, assure that you have regular and meaningful interaction with your manager. Be sure this contact is not perceived as patronizing or insincere. These should be valuable discussions about current projects, activities, and ideas.

**Share concerns openly with your manager**

When facing uncertainty, be willing to openly discuss your concerns with your manager. Your manager cannot help you work through your concerns if he or she does not know what concerns you have. This needs to be assertive communication that focuses on the situation from a larger perspective than just you. Clearly state your concern, with evidence as to why you feel it is a concern. When possible, share alternatives you see playing out so your manager is able to respond to your ideas rather than having to generate a response immediately. If your manager is unsure of the final outcome, trust that he or she is being honest with you and allow the manager some time to reflect on your concern. Schedule time to follow-up on the issue in the near future.
Check that your projects remain important

On a regular basis conduct project briefings with your manager. Share your vision for the project, progress to date, planned next steps, and any challenges you may be facing in completing the project. Identify alternative approaches in the project that may be employed as market conditions change. Assure your manager that you can make your work on the project valuable even if changes in the organization plan changes your focus in some way. This will demonstrate your value now and for the future.

Build relationships with co-workers

You are not alone in your thoughts, concerns, and anticipation of the future. Be open to discussing potential changes with team members. Be sure to keep these conversations positive and supportive. Avoid criticizing, condemning and complaining about organization decisions. If you find conversations turning negative, or into gossip sessions, reaffirm any positive news or ideas you may have and politely excuse yourself from the conversation. This is not a time to earn a reputation as one who struggles with change. Leaders will be looking for positive employees who can help them smooth out the bumps and bruises that occur in dealing with the current environment.

Be committed to results

Be sure to stay focused on delivering against your expectations. Even as projects change, keep a positive focus on contributing at the highest possible level. Productive employees often find that times of change open new doors for professional opportunities they could not see ahead of time.
Conclusion

The current economic turbulence can be exciting and scary at the same time. As an organization, assure that you are taking steps to provide direction and information that allows employees to remain engaged. As a manager, find ways to keep individual communication open and directed. Keep employees focused on results and opportunities rather than fear and uncertainty. As an employee, keep the lines of communication open with management and your co-workers. Find ways to make progress on projects and be ready with alternative suggestions as to how to make current efforts useful no matter how market conditions impact your organization. Applying these simple approaches will help keep your organization as engaging and adaptable as possible so you are able to adjust to market changes with confidence, ease, and a sense of connection to the future.
References and Additional Information


