

Getting everyone on-side: Motivating staff

We've long known that UK workers are the least 'engaged' in Europe: they trust their managers and employers less than other European workers. It's not certain why this is. The important issue now is that this is a bad starting point from which to face difficult trading conditions.

But there are things you can do about the situation and they will strengthen your organisation, not just now but when the upturn inevitably comes.

Experienced manager knows what happens in a down turn. People get nervous. They're less likely to accept at face value what managers say. Time is lost in gossip and rumour, much of which seems to be 180 degrees from what's actually going on.

If job losses do happen, some people may be angry at the perceived treatment of their friends and colleagues; there is grumbling about additional workloads; more rumours spread, rarely looking at the bright side.

That's a worst case scenario but it highlights some important points, not least that, while good managers dislike making good people redundant, the most difficult job is motivating people after a major restructuring programme driven by issues outside their control.

So, what can you do about it ?

First, don't try to stamp out gossip entirely. It's wasted energy. Gossip happens in all organisations and actually binds them together. But if you come across genuinely harmful or wrong-headed gossip, make a point of refuting it: clearly, calmly and, if it's appropriate, publicly.

Two, understand what motivates your staff individually. There's good news here. In every piece of research done on this issue we find that money is not the prime motivator of achievement. People need enough to live but, past that point, other issues – sociability, praise, power, influence and knowing you've done a job well - are important for different sorts of people. Understanding someone's personality will give you a shrewd idea of what motivates them. Even those who seem to be motivated by money – who always ask for pay increases – may actually be motivated by something else: their perceived influence. Change their job title and they may be happy. In times like these pay increases may be difficult. But the positive reaction of people to across the board pay cuts or shorter working time as a means of saving jobs, proves yet again that people can feel real loyalty to their colleagues.

They also can be loyal to managers. 'Join a company: leave the manager' is an old maxim. But you can also stay because of your manager. Managers' behaviour is absolutely essential to keeping staff you want to keep, and to increasing motivation and loyalty. People fear uncertainty more than obviously dangerous situations. This fear is bred into us over many thousand years. So, having a manager who acts consistently (is firm when need be, understanding when that's necessary), who talks to human beings not numbers is crucial. Managers must answer questions truthfully. If they can't answer a question, they must say so. They must also spot problems early and address them not avoid them. Managers like this – often known as authentic – create loyalty, far stronger than one towards a brand or company name.

If your managers don't know how to act like this, a behavioural assessment like PPA can start the process of self-knowledge on which to build 'authenticity'. A 360 degree also serves as a basis for developing the right skills.

Finally, if you do have to let people go, spend a little bit of time and resources supporting them; for instance offering them some test feedback over half a day to help them decide what they want to do next. Quite apart from this being good practice anyway, the word will get back to your existing staff and they'll view you the organisation in a better light. This will also help in your local recruitment in the future: reputation as a good or bad employer gets around.

You can't avoid some fall in morale during difficult times. It's human nature. But by taking the time to develop the right skills and really understand staff you can build it up again and find you're outperforming your competitors.