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Dare to face the future

Engage employees during economic downturn

Question:

This has been a tough year. We're watching our budgets very carefully. Training is one of my responsibilities. We're not going to do much training this year, at least not any new topics. I'm frustrated by this because it's shortsighted. I think that now is the time to invest in our people but this is a hard sell to senior management. Am I naïve to think this way? I don't think so, but I'm made to feel this way. I'd like to see you write about this.

Answer:

Yes, 2008 has been a tough year so far for many companies. At the same time, though, from my way of looking at things,

a basic question becomes, "What are you going to do about it?"

Let me be clear at the outset, I am firmly in the questioner's corner. My basic mindset is that we need to be driving by looking forward, not backward. So, in this column, I will share some thoughts about what organizations can do during these tough times in order to get ready to move forward.

At the outset, let me emphasize that, in my opinion, this issue is primarily a function of the leadership that is offered to the organization. Leaders set the tone for the organization. I would go so far as to say that it is the tone at the top that primarily determines the kind of organization that ultimately evolves.

So, for me, a basic question is, during these tough times, what kind of tone are your leaders setting?

If you think like I do, then you believe that leaders need to set a tone that the best days are before us, just within our reach, just around the corner. To grasp them, we need to continue to believe in ourselves. We need to look ahead. We need to seek out opportunities. We need to make things happen. In short, we need to be on the move.

Now is the time to re-visit foundational and fundamental questions related to the organization's "one thing." What is the organization passionate about? What is it really good at? What drives its economic engine? Answers that encompass each of these three questions point toward the path to be pursued in the future.

As you explore the "one thing," I strongly encourage you to see if you can

identify at least one opportunity or trend that you can capitalize on. Identify one leap forward, one augmentation, one refinement, etc. that your organization could pursue. What is it that, if it could be done by your organization, would immediately differentiate it from the competition? What would happen if your organization were the first one to convert an idea, a dream, from a mere possibility to a practical reality?

In an information age characterized by fast paced change, heightened competition, and increased focus on satisfying customers, being nimble must be an organizational imperative. Indeed, today, nimbleness is a necessity, not a luxury. After all, it's not the big who eat the small; it's the fast who eat the slow.

I hope you're not reading this thinking, "My gosh, we're both small and slow." Clearly, that's not the place to be. If you are thinking this, though, read on. Some suggestions are forthcoming for operating more adaptively.

The pursuit of innovation for purposes of marketplace differentiation must be the mindset of today's leaders. Learning is a crucial driver in all of this. In the question, the reader admits to feeling frustrated because training is being put on hold. While I'm not suggesting tight economic times are the right occasion for going on a training spending spree, I would suggest that if the organization is going to be nimble, differentiated, etc., then its members need to be equipped with knowledge, skills, and behaviors that drive these outcomes.

We need to pay attention to what the

futurist Alvin Toffler said on this matter. I wholeheartedly endorse his belief that, “the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write. Rather, they will be those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

In short, in addition to whatever product or service your organization offers, I would suggest that if you really want to be on the move, then your organization needs to be in the learning business. You need to make sure that you are educating and developing your people to the fullest so that they can help your organization become all that it can be.

What follows, then, are some prescriptions for encouraging organizational nimbleness, highlighting the importance of developing the most important resource that any organization possesses - its people. I would emphasize, by the way, that a powerful equation for high performance is to cultivate the capabilities of your people so that they cultivate the loyalty of another important resource - the organization's customers. Remember, employees who are well-served will serve well.

1. Emphasize collaboration.

Partnership and teaming need to be emphasized to truly harness the full potential of the workforce. What is the collective IQ of your organization? Have you fully tapped into the expertise of your people? Are best practices shared across the organization?

2. Build partnerships for employee development.

You need to make it easy for people

to better themselves. To what extent do your managers take an active interest in the development of their employees? To what extent do they operate as referral agents, coaches, and mentors?

3. Offer multiple ways to develop.

Today's employees want to make sure they are using their skills to the fullest. Feeling stuck is not where they want to be. Career progression need not be a solely vertical journey these days. What are you doing to get your people where they need to be in order for them to grow?

4. Provide access to information.

Are you doing everything you can to let your people know the goals they are to reach, the standards by which they will be held accountable, and how what they do helps fulfill the organization's strategy? Sometimes, gains are obtained merely by helping your people to more clearly see how their individual contributions bear upon team or work area contributions and how team or work area contributions add up to organizational performance.

5. Make sure compensation rewards contribution/performance.

Performance management is a crucial aspect in encouraging peak performance. The research is pretty clear on this point. Achievement oriented people

like to be rewarded for doing well. They'll work harder when this happens. They are discouraged, however, when they see under-performers rewarded for under-performing.

6. Emphasize critical thinking, risk taking, and creativity.

This might be the most important element. Nimble, opportunistic organizations are comprised of nimble, opportunistic people, not risk-averse guardians of the status quo. Encourage your people to continuously challenge processes and approaches. Encourage your leaders to operate as change champions.

Former U. S. Sen. John Glenn has observed, “People are afraid of the future. If a man faces up to it, and takes the dare of the future, he can have some control over his destiny. That's an exciting idea to me, better than waiting around with everybody else to see what's going to happen.”

I don't know about you, but I'm with Sen. Glenn. So, what are you going to do today to start to take the dare of the future?



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