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‘Keep their heads up’ *Managers must nurture employees’ morale*

Question:

Your March 6 column in *BizTimes Milwaukee* addressed an important issue. I agree with you that it’s important for managers to find ways to talk with employees about today’s uncertainties and unknowns. I wonder if you could take that column one step further and talk about what managers can do to help employees keep their spirits up during these hard times. Thanks.

Answer:

The column the reader references focused on the importance of crafting open, authentic messages delivered in real-time. Access to information was highlighted as a critical variable in helping employees deal with uncertainty. I encouraged managers to craft macro messages to share with the large group and micro messages to share with each employee on an individual level. I also encouraged managers to direct employees to other organizational resources (e.g., EAP program), so that they might fully equip themselves to confront various specific risks.

I’m happy to follow-up on the reader’s suggestion to extend my discussion. In this column, then, I’ll focus on what managers can do to help employees “keep their heads up.”

Let’s start by introducing the foundational concept of self-esteem. Self-esteem has to do with appreciating one’s self worth and importance, being accountable for one’s behaviors and acting re-

sponsibly toward others.

There are two important facets to self-esteem: (1) self-efficacy and (2) self-respect. Self-efficacy is the belief that you can achieve what you set out to do. Self-respect has to do with what you think and feel about yourself. There are some distinct differences between people who are low versus high in self-esteem.

People who have low self-esteem are more likely to:

- » Maintain an external locus of control (i.e., attribute outcomes to external or situational factors).

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- » Participate in self-destructive behaviors.
- » Exhibit poor human relations skills.
- » Experience the “failure syndrome” (i.e., seek out activities or situations in which they are unlikely to succeed).

Conversely, people who have high self-esteem are more typically:

- » Have an internal locus of control (i.e., attribute outcomes to internal or personal variables).
- » Future-oriented and not overly concerned with past mistakes or failures.
- » Better able to cope with life’s problems and disappointments.

- » Able to feel all dimensions of emotion without letting those emotions affect their behavior in a negative way.
- » Less likely to take things personally.

The descriptions offered above suggest that people with low self-esteem are going to be more likely to feel down in the dumps when bad news (e.g., economic downturn) comes their way. Depending upon the specific circumstances with which they are confronted, though, even

people with high self-esteem might start to feel unsettled or uncomfortable. Let’s face it, there’s not much good news being dispensed these days.

So, what can a manager do to counterbalance this negative trend? For starters, managers can reach out to their employees and help them to think clearly about the situation they confront. What is really going on? What are the knowns? What are the unknowns? Managers can be very helpful by working with their employees to do this kind of “reality checking.”

Further, managers can help their employees by: (1) changing the conditions (i.e., arrange conditions where employees are more likely to do well or succeed); and

(2) changing the consequences (i.e., offer positive reinforcement when people do well or succeed).

Additionally, I offer the following suggestions as a guide for some specific actions a manager might take to help employees stay positive and feel good about themselves:

Encourage a search for the source of negative feelings

Self-assessment and reflection might help to identify why a person feels poorly about himself/herself. In adulthood, perceived gaps or feelings of inequity are often at the root. Help your employees think about how much of their self-esteem is wrapped up in the things they possess, how they compare with others, the status attached to the job they hold, etc.

Help employees to identify and accept their limitations

Managers can encourage employees to accept themselves for who they truly are. For example, a manager might suggest that an employee make it a goal each day to be the best person they can be along the lines of, "Don't worry about being somebody else. . . do your best . . . don't worry about the rest."

Encourage employees to take responsibility for their decisions

President Harry Truman famously had a sign on his desk that said, "The buck stops here." Help employees to adopt this credo in their daily practices. By taking ownership of their lives and the choices they make, employees will develop autonomy. While there is no guarantee that every decision they make will turn out as they wish, they can still take pride in knowing it was their decision and they did what they thought was right.

Help employees discover their strengths

Encourage employees to reflect on their unique gifts and talents. At what activity do they excel? About what are they

most passionate? Then, help them devote time and energy to honing and refining skills at which they can excel, rather than toiling, trying to master something at which they will never be more than fair or average. In short, encourage them to play to their strengths.

Offer support and guidance as a mentor

When individuals are able to connect with mentors in relationships that are trust-based and authentic, a host of positive results accrue. More targeted and honest feedback is possible. Heightened focus on individual development is possible. Employees have a "sounding board" to whom they can confide. And so on.

Encourage employees to set goals

Zig Ziglar, the noted motivational speaker, has observed that tangible goals are the biggest difference between a person who is a "wandering generality" and a "meaningful specific." If employees are uncertain about where they are going or how they are doing, step in to help them develop clarity by established some achievable goals.

Encourage employees to use positive self-talk

The evidence is clear-cut. People with low self-esteem tend to engage in negative self-talk (e.g., "Bad things just seem to surround me"). People with high self-esteem tend to engage in positive self-talk (e.g., "I feel confident that if I put my best foot forward, good things will happen"). So, a powerful step in building self-esteem and developing a positive attitude is to monitor the self-talk in which one engages. The message here is to encourage your employees to choose happiness and embrace optimism.

In the final analysis, while a manager does not have the power to make an employee "cheer up," by engaging with an

employee in the ways that I have described in this column, a manager does have the power to encourage an employee to see the world a bit differently. Ultimately, though, it is the employee's choice. But, the suggestions offered in this column provide a path that employees might choose to pursue if they wish to break out of the spiral of negative thinking. ■

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