



Developing a positive workplace culture in difficult times

By Jane Davies

We know training is tough. Managing a business is also tough but keeping staff motivated, well that's really tough even at the best of times.

Recently thanks to the global financial crisis, change in government bodies and numerous other factors, all three above elements have become even harder.

So how can you keep staff motivated while building or protecting your organisational culture? I'm sure that many of you have wrestled with this difficult issue in the past.

Sure, it's loosening up now for many, but others are still struggling to survive, let alone build and improve their organisational culture. It is precisely these circumstances when motivation is furthest from your thoughts but it is NOW that you should be seriously devoting time and effort to your cultural development!

Your team may be aware of the many hardships you and many others have been shouldering during these challenging times – and you may not even know it! Some may have incurred your wrath – not necessarily because they deserved it, but because they were handy when you needed to vent. So stop for a minute and consider. After all, if there is no loyalty, no energy and no confidence in the leadership, what is left to rebuild when this crisis passes? Starting to rebuild trust will take much longer and may even be less productive if you do not address it now.

There are five areas that must be considered.

1 Team Member Relationships

Teams made up of members who like each other will work together more co-operatively. We all prefer to work with those whom we like. This should have been assessed when the teams were in the forming stage. The opportunity now is to have a good hard look and ensure that your teams like working together. If not, perhaps there needs to be better procedures for selecting new team members so that they are more likely to work well together.

In the current situation, perhaps some brain storming with the entire team about how to build compatibility or methods of decision-making so that no one feels overlooked or railroaded.

This brings us to our next point...

2 Decision Making Systems

The way decisions are made in your organisation provides big clues as to what the culture will look like.

Micro-management of experienced teams sends the message that management has little confidence in the skills and abilities of the team, hence, they cannot be trusted to make decisions. It's even worse if decisions are made without consulting those who will be affected. This type of dictatorial behaviour can be demoralising. If consultation only takes place with a few,

then calls of favouritism will soon surface.

I am not suggesting for one minute that you just hand the decision-making over – we all know that there are decisions that only senior staff should make. What I am talking about is sharing your load and if it is appropriate and will affect the team and how they do their jobs, then they should at least be encouraged to discuss it in a forum situation. This should include ample notice to allow them to prepare and discuss pending issues amongst themselves first.

You may be surprised by how empowering this will be and surprised at how responsible and creative the decisions and solutions are after the dust settles and the team becomes accustomed to being included in the process.

3 Communication

Communication is the lifeblood of the business! Feeling informed is vital to an energetic culture. If you canvas the team, most will affirm that communication is vital. How does your team rate your communication?

Communication is more than just an email, newsletter or notice. Communication includes all of the points related to decision-making too. Effective communication that is intended to be team-building is not just about being informed. It includes having an opportunity to question, discuss and explore the information being shared.

Communication must be delivered to and by all team members, not just by a select few members of the team.

Look at the communication patterns that currently exist within your organisation. Are all team members encouraged to share their opinions? Is there anything that stops open and honest communication from taking place?

Each member of a team should be allowed to have an opportunity to take part in the communication process, and any problems seen in a team should be analysed and addressed so that the same problems do not happen in the future.

After the discussion, follow-up the resolution, action or just confirm the discussions by email, notice or newsletter to ensure accuracy – but only after there has been agreement.

4 Job Tasks

When times are tough, as some of us are still currently experiencing, teams are often required to perform duties that under ordinary circumstances would not fall into their basket. Some willingly accept this and others find it onerous.

As these tasks were assigned, was there effective communication? Does the team clearly understand the reasons for the changes? Do they know the time frame for a 'return to the norm'? Do you?

Have you asked your teams to perform tasks in a manner that is not in line with their values? For example, giving answers to learners rather than providing the extra help, or encouraging 'tick and flick' to get numbers through even though quality goes out the window or even put them in the position of using materials that have been illegally copied or are inferior because money is short?

The effect of any of any of these things on the motivation of the team can be devastating. The solution is straight forward; communicate. Explain why, correct, apologise for the situation and establish standards and monitoring for the new paths.

Few people like performing poorly or illegally and even fewer will perform well and be motivated by performing in ways which compromise their values. You can start to change and improve now.

5 Rewards

Do you have a reward system? I can almost hear the outcry – "In these times, I don't think so!" Rewards do not have to be specifically about money. In fact, none of the suggestions that I have made involve expense – just time, thought and sharing. It is widely reputed that a simple "Thank you for [insert the action or behaviour here] is more motivating and appreciated than many other bigger and more expensive gestures.

Once the communication channels are open, you can discuss team days and decide how you can maximise the sharing and enjoyment and minimise the expense.

Example:

For Christmas this year, everyone including their families (partner and children) could meet in a nearby picnic area. Everyone brings a plate with food (decide who brings savoury and who brings sweets etc ahead of time). All dishes can be laid out on the tables and shared, or you could have a ballot or lottery to decide who gets what. Regardless, organise a game or other activities, perhaps

some board games and you may find it is the best team-building and Christmas party yet.

If you are really game, you could do a 'Secret Santa'. Everyone brings a non-gender specific gift worth under \$5 or \$10 (this could be a team decision!). On the day, everyone draws a number from a hat. Number 1 chooses and opens their gift. Then number 2 and so on. The fun bit is that number 2 and every subsequent number can look at the gift they have, and if they like, swap it with any previously opened gifts without consultation with the owner! This causes lots of laughs and as the gifts are clever and of little actual value, it is a great and fun way to wind up the day.

So, where is all of the expense? I really believe the best things in life can be free – including team motivation – if you just take a little time to think it through.

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Jane has also established and operated RTOs in Australia and New Zealand. Since 1992 Jane has run Precision Group one of the most successful education and training publishing companies in Australia catering to business training and providing high quality training material and assessments. Contact Precision Group on 07 3351 6336 or visit them online www.precisiongroup.com.au



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