

Committed or Locked-up?

Performance improvement in times of recession

The recession has taken its toll on the finances of many businesses. As recovery becomes a reality, Anthony Carnell argues, it is time to give especial thought to a vital resource.

For most staff, recession means threat, risk, keeping their head down, macho management and a feeling of loss of control. It's not so much about commitment (or engagement as the jargon goes), but just holding onto their job. All this insecurity, a build-up of mistrust, and we expect staff to be committed to our improvement plans? I mean, really! Without our most expensive, most differentiating, and our least known resource committed and engaged, then it's an uphill battle all the way.

Why worry about whether they are committed and engaged? Well, research shows that engaged staff are more likely to talk-up your business, perform to a higher standard, and are less likely to leave you. They also experience higher levels of job satisfaction, which means, they care more about the business and in helping it to be as successful as it should. They are also far more flexible to change. It will save you cost, ensure higher quality, and higher participation in improving the performance of the business. So, what can we do to bring back the

'engaged' workforce where the employee is investing a portion of their heart and mind to the business – wanting to go the extra mile?

From bars to hearts – Getting back your people

Let's be honest, there is no quick fix. Trust may have diminished, and the culture may well have shifted during the tougher times. It is not a launch event, but a series of changes that just become business as usual. Remember, employee psychological defences may be up having gone through a period of feeling less control over their working lives. The primary areas that will help drive engagement for most businesses include:

- Measure where you are. A simple climate survey with published results will go a long way to providing the honesty and transparency your people are searching for. And, as importantly, at least the business knows where it is starting from.
- Set a course of action which is communicated consistently and continually throughout the business.
- Enable staff to feed their views up through the business. Do not underestimate the impact of this on engagement. If you want improvements, it helps if staff feels ownership.
- Brief line managers as to what is happening so they can talk to their staff and make sure it happens.
- Even when there is nothing to communicate, do it anyway. They need a trustable source of information to counter the now-likely very strong rumour mill.
- Start recognising performance. There is little cost and it goes a long way. Remember, different types of recognition motivate different employees.
- Skill-up managers to recognise and deal with the effects of 'survivor syndrome' if your organisation has made redundancies. They may have taken on an increased workload and have lost close work friends. One-to-one communication is everything during this period.
- Make it softer, but not fluffy. Macho management may have taken over during these times, so some softening is now a real need. Ensure you have mechanisms in place to quickly deal with conflict and stress. It is often when staff take their first breath after a period of sustained stress that all the symptoms finally come through. Be ready for them.



Getting heads above the parapet

The simple table below defines some of the primary commitment/engagement factors and represents a consensus of the available literature. We have also added the potential effects from recession against each of those factors.

Factors encouraging engagement	Possible impact from recession
Career advancement	Organisations rationalised with redundancies and continual rumours of job losses. Little career advancement available.
Personal training and development	An easy cost to take out of the business during recession, and typically one of the first to go.
A manager that seems enthusiastic and committed to the business	Most managers are also employees. How many remain positive in the face fear of redundancy and dwindling profits? Macho management styles may well be dominant during these periods.
Seeing how personal contribution then contributes to company performance	Most businesses treat recession as an emergency situation. Autocratic management styles take over. Dramatic and continual changes mean that communication is always catching up with the speed of change.
Manager and organisational communication to employee	With continual changes and a lag in communication, any communication becomes top-down and will, inevitably, feel contradictory at times.
Employees ideas are listened to and taken account of, and are able to feel part of the decision-making process	Changes come at such a fast pace, inclusion in decision-making is replaced with control and command.
A feeling that the organisation cares about the employee's health and well-being	Studies indicate that this slips down the priority list as cost-cutting tactics take over.
A good relationship with their peers and manager	If the culture is right and there is a common focus, a team can be very effective pulling together during these periods. However, given that communication lags as it filters through the hierarchy, a team can hit a negative spiral just as easily.
The employee's contribution is recognised	With reduced resource and higher workloads, how much time is available for recognition?
Secure employment based on fair performance criteria	Within the UK, there is a tendency towards the values of security and stability. Knowing how your performance is measured, and having control over your performance are key criteria. This is likely to slip during times of cost-cutting and fast-paced change.
Stimulating and challenging work	This can go two ways. Firstly, recession may mean continual challenges as the employee becomes part of the fight for survival. Alternatively, an ethos of "we need to plug a hole" may be an organisational response.



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