



Employees need to strengthen worth in tough market

Job uncertainty can push performance



By Rick Speckmann



A few weeks ago, I happened to catch a piece on *The Lehrer Report* television show about how employees should manage job security. It made me realize that this economy requires different thinking and behavior on the part of the employee as well as management.

To say that most employees today are a bit anxious about the economy and the impact on jobs is an understatement. Employees are tensing up and they need to know what behaviors might secure their positions at work.

In the February issue I suggested that management tactics need to change during periods of economic uncertainty. That article focused on the cause and effect indicators of recession behavior as well as the best manner to counter employee productivity slippage. In this article I will focus on important employee “change” behaviors and I will also provide mentoring and coaching advice that will help managers keep the team “tracking” to goal.

This is the sort of article you will want your staff to read because in one sense it is about survival, and on the

other end, it speaks to personal development and skill growth.

As a matter of clarification, I describe mentoring as those activities that provide employees with experience based guidance and emotional support. In recession periods, an infrequent economic occurrence, many younger employees may be naïve or inexperienced in dealing with such challenging time. There is an element of insecurity and fear of the unknown. The manager’s mentoring role is to demonstrate confidence, direction and vision.

When I think of coaching, I imagine a “hitting coach” in baseball or Tiger Woods’ golf coach. Coaches identify specific execution elements of a person within their specific job task and then offer refinements to improve performance. In baseball, a recommendation might be to move the left foot back in the batters box to give the batter a better look at left field, and for Tiger it might be closing the club face eight degrees on the back swing to change the draw of the ball.

John Challenger, the featured guest on *The Lehrer Report* that day, commented about tactics that elevate employee job security: “Well, if you are in your job, you want to be taking measures to make it stronger, make sure that you get more face time at the home (office)...”

Challenger also added that you need to strengthen work relationships so that “there’s people to advocate for you.” I am drawn to the idea of an employee making their job position “stronger.” Here is how I would expand on that theme with some “real-

ities” I want my employees to deal with, and some mentoring and coaching support item for managers.

My “face the facts” guidance for my direct reports would include:

Sink or swim, it is your choice. Through negative perceptions and fear response, employees can talk themselves right out of their current jobs and their employment future. As a manager, I want to have each employee deal with the facts of the economy and the requirements of performance to push the company through it and secure their position.

A mentor discussion would work on building confidence through reality-based discussion and a coaching discussion would serve to help the person focus on their most important tasks. Each employee must be informed of what really matters to the company and understand what adjusted performance expectations are required. This period requires more than buy-in, it requires unconditional commitment from each employee.

Make noise and be alert. I remember walking through a company years ago during a tough economy. The place was eerily quiet. I asked the owner, “Where is everybody?” to which he responded, “Hiding.” It reminded me of staring at my desk in grade school to avoid the eyes of the teacher who had just asked a question to which I had no idea of the answer. Of course I was called on.

During a stressed economy, the smart employees appear even more engaged and they make sure that their manager knows they are really “on top of their work.” If there is ever a time

for transparency of thought and behaviors, this is that time.

I would tell my staff that I am watching their movement and I need to know sooner than later how things are going for them, and most importantly, that they are working harder. I would remind my staff of the screaming silence I experience when they are avoiding me, and what prompts me to become suspicious of low productivity. Additionally, I would talk each person through the type and frequency of productive “noise” communication that assures me they are on task.

I would also remind them that within every period of scarcity there is also abundance, and they must keep their eyes and minds open to emerging opportunities for the company.

Get help, give help, or get out. Asking for help is not a sign of insecurity nor is it dangerous exposure that could get you fired. On the con-

trary, prolonging your ignorance of something you are responsible for is what will get you fired. Visibly increasing your learning pace is valuable and builds one’s equity within the company. Some employees will incorrectly determine that by not helping other employees, they will secure their own position at the expense of the person who needed help.

During trying economies, mounting anxieties and fear expose the true values and integrity of people. Employees who would toss others off the raft to protect themselves erode the intersecting elements of cooperation and collaboration that create team synergy. I would make sure that I have communicated my expectations of civility and purposeful support during challenging events and I would coach individual on how, and to whom to seek or provide assistance. Substandard teaming behavior is a cancer and the root

cause must be taken out.

It’s results, stupid. Certainly a harsh statement, but it cannot be stated any more effectively. These economic periods require tangible results and for those who cannot post a score (contribution) daily are taking away from the company. Employees are ultimately concerned about their personal welfare and survival. Owners are concerned about the survival of the company and that of all the people who depend on the company.

I would mentor employees to understand the cold, hard, objective reality of the importance of personal contribution and I would coach each person how to review their scorecard on a daily basis. At the end of the day, only one thing matters to the future of business: Profit. Therefore, contribution to profit is the immutable law of employee survival.