

WANTED:

LEADERS WITH ESP FOR TOUGH TIMES

There's a new kind of ESP in town, and leaders who effectively identify and manage employees' emotional needs will be the ones who best survive the slump.

By Beverly Kaye and Eileen McDargh





Throw out the crystal ball, the Vulcan mind meld, and any other kind of image the term “ESP” conjures up. Lately, we’ve all been talking and reading about one type of ESP that politicians and the federal government have thrown to the public and private sectors as a lifeline—an economic stimulus package. However, employees in downsized, right-sized, and capsized organizations are desperate for yet another kind of ESP—an “emotional stimulus package.”

Consider the evidence that fear and uncertainty affect the bottom line: A survey conducted in late 2008 by Workplace Options reported that 48 percent of adults are less productive at work due to economic uncertainty. November

2008’s *HR Magazine* stated that “when survivor syndrome takes root, many of the most valued employees who survive a layoff go on to quit their jobs, thus making retention more critical.”

The good news is that the ESP for leaders requires no cash, no loans, no financial audit, and certainly no czar. The bad news is that leadership ESP requires time, attention, and a single-minded belief that maintaining talent, in the long run, will benefit the organization.

Five secrets to develop a leader’s ESP Huddle together and muddle together. Disappear into your office, and rumors fly. A leader with ESP knows that answers and next-steps



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can come from any part of the organization. While the decision ultimately lands on the senior leader's desk, involving as many parts of the organization as possible sends a clear message that, "we are in this together."

When times are tough, the tough communicate with straight, honest, no-manure talk. Don't gloss over the truth or suggest that "this is temporary" if you know it isn't, and don't tell others there is a concrete plan in motion when there isn't one.

Most importantly, if you don't know what is happening at the top, or what the response to the quarterly loss of profit will be, don't hesitate to say those special words that so few managers and leaders ever offer: "I don't know."

The days of absolutes are gone. It is perfectly okay to say that things might get worse before they get better. When faced with challenges that have no precedent in history, trial and error must occur. Make it safe for people to fail or to quickly report failure or less-than-desirable results, and reward their truth-telling. This way, the organization can also respond quickly.

Your employees are looking to you for guidance and direction. Think about your actions, words, and the example you are setting. If you were one of your employees, would you be more concerned, or would you feel that you are getting the straight scoop? Think about it! And remember, less time with managers leaves more time for the grapevine to work overtime.

Share the pain. It's a silly move for executives to hold on to visible perks, high salaries, and corporate trappings when the organization is in pain. Under a strict deadline for a product, one senior executive I know came into the office at 4 a.m. to work with the team who was struggling to meet the deadline. That sent a *huge* message.

One of the greatest examples of leadership ESP in dangerous times is found in the amazing story of Shackleton's aborted exploration of the South Pole. In 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton set

out from England on a daring expedition aboard *The Endurance*—a name that later proved prophetic. His goal: to accomplish the first crossing of the Antarctic continent.

His ship and crew became trapped in a heavy ice pack that literally began crushing the ship, isolating them in one of the most hostile environments on earth. But whatever Shackleton expected his crew to do, he modeled it first. He jettisoned his most prized possessions to lighten the ship's weight before asking the crew to do the same.

He kept no executive privilege for himself, experiencing every deprivation along with his crew. The only answer for rescue was to lead a small team to the whaling station on South Georgia—an 800-mile journey in an open boat across a region known as the most storm-swept area of water in the world. Imagine keeping up morale in that team. Shackleton's success is both remarkable as well as instructive for these times.

Celebrate the gain. There is always something to be thankful for, even in the gloomiest of days. Perhaps we need to consider the domino effect of adapting a "less doom, less gloom" attitude.

Let's face it. The media is having a heyday with the current economic picture. While serious news is all too accurate,

RUN A TEST

Leadership ESP is working well if employees can honestly report that there is truth to the following statements. Use a measure of a 1 ("are you kidding") to 5 ("this is how it really is") score as to how you *think* employees would respond.

Are your hunches on target? Now what will you do about them?

- We support one another, and camaraderie is visible.
- We feel encouraged to bring up new ideas and take risks, and we believe that together we can get through challenges.
- We trust that senior leadership tells the truth and keeps us informed of both the upside and the downside.
- We dispose of ideas that no longer work.
- We bend over backwards for our customers and clients because we *are* in this together.
- We take responsibility for controlling what we can within our jobs.
- We are proud of what we have done.
- We can find reasons to laugh and have fun on the job.
- We are given the rationale for decisions and encouraged to ask questions.
- We see our managers often, and they are both approachable and candid.
- We might have cut costs, but we have not damaged our product or service.

why are there no stories about the light at the end of the tunnel? Why are there no stories about leaders who are keeping their teams intact or giving up their own salaries? Why are there no stories about leaders who are cutting deeply into their own perks to save the compensation of their employees? Why is there no account of a family who is able to save their home from foreclosure? These stories *are* out there.

We are not suggesting a Pollyanna approach, but we have heard of leaders who are taking a proactive approaching and concentrating on what is going well. One manager in a high-tech firm began weekly “accomplishment” meetings. Each Friday, he asks his team to report on what they accomplished during that week and encourages them to give positive strokes to one another. Although it may sound corny, it works.

Similarly, another supervisor holds a Monday morning phone meeting and reports on all the achievements of her department from the past week. She makes an effort to let the team know what’s working well and expresses appreciation to individuals and teams.

What would happen if (even for a few hours) leaders were intentional about not adding to the “doom” news in their own work groups and teams. Wouldn’t that go part of the way toward lifting the gloom?

Get out of the weeds; plant some seeds.

The Chinese symbol for change incorporates the terms for both “danger” as well as “opportunity.” What new opportunities might be present during the tough times of the past several months?

Some of our greatest inventions were imagined during tough times. Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard, the cofounders of Hewlett-Packard started their company in a garage during the depression of the 1930s. Cisco has emerged from numerous downturns as a stronger, more viable company by using each downturn to refocus, streamline, and refine processes as well as people.

Use hard times as an opportunity to search for talented people now

available as “an extra set of hands.” Pull small “skunk work” groups together to brainstorm the opportunities that this particular landscape offers. Encourage workers to challenge sacred cows and to design better ways to work with customers. These are the seeds for tomorrow.

Know that a positive attitude is not just a platitude. This section is for employees and managers alike. Seeing the glass as half-empty, focusing on the negative, and finding all that is wrong becomes a vortex that sucks the spirit dry. While this is not an easy task for many, Martin Seligman’s continued work in positive psychology offers evidence that optimism can be learned.

Any event can be reframed by literally stating an opposite way of viewing the situation. This is not to deny the reality of hard emotional facts, but rather to create positive expectations. Such a statement might be, “This cutback in my hours now frees me to learn a new skill,” or, “This shift in the office will expose me to new people and relationships.”

Consider finding an “optimism buddy” so that you can mutually help each other develop reframing statements. Allow yourselves to coach each other when negativity rears its head, and help each other find humor in situations. Laughter is a critical survival skill.

An emotional stimulus makes economic sense

Actively working on developing an emotional stimulus package has documented bottom-line results. The January 2009 survey by the Institute for Corporate Productivity found that 75 percent of layoff survivors reported a decline in personal productivity, a decrease in customer service, and a decline in product quality. However, workers who gave their managers high scores for approachability, candor, and visibility were 72 percent less likely to report a decrease in their productivity and 65 percent less likely to report a decline in the company’s product or service.

The days of absolutes are gone. It is perfectly okay to say that things might get worse before they get better. When faced with challenges that have no precedent in history, trial and error must occur.



If quality and service vanish, a company competes on price alone. That’s a death trap for the long-term survival of any organization. Develop a solid emotional stimulus package, train leaders in simple skills, and the company you save might very well be your own. **T+D**

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