

How to keep employees informed and engaged during tough times

Recent research* out of the US indicates that although the recession is top of mind for employees, 54% say they haven't heard anything from management about how it affects their organisation!

(*Weber Shandwick)

In this information vacuum most staff, estimated to be around almost 74%, are actually getting their 'information' from colleagues.

None of this is a surprise and if you surveyed in New Zealand you would probably get the same result even across our Small/Medium Enterprises.

So what? We know from the post '87 crash that poor communication during tough times triggers a drop in trust and sets you on a downward course - morale drops, productivity drops, customer service drops, employee-initiated process improvement reduces and good people can start to jump ship.

How to keep employees informed and engaged during tough times

It's not rocket science and it doesn't involve any of the HR Industry's overcooked and expensive employee-engagement concoctions. The solution lies in leaders having conversations – the right conversations.

Provide people with context - about the market, your organisation's performance within it and your coping strategy for the recession.

Some things to consider communicating:

- Normalise the recessionary cycle - although recognise that this recession is major
- Who are your major clients and how could the recession impact them?
- How have you performed to date and what's your forecast for the next 12 months
- What do the numbers look like currently? Sales, financials, new business
- What's happening to your competitors?
- What growth opportunities does a recession actually provide?
- How do you anticipate riding out the recession - what are you doing now and what do you plan?
- If you have a history of riding out recessions, talk about the coping strategies you've used previously and any parallels to now.

Help people see their personal line-of-sight to your organisation's performance

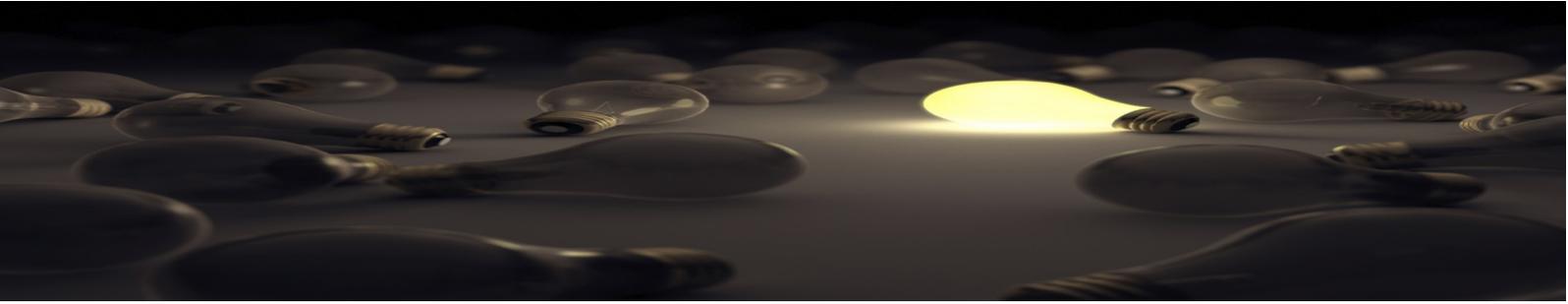
This may sound so obvious yet it surprises me how many employees in organisations – large and small (that's the organisation not the person!) – can't articulate how the job they do directly adds value to the organisation's strategy.

- **Discuss how everyone within your business directly or indirectly adds value** to service/product delivery. Don't assume your performance management process does this.
- **Make it visible** – 'line of sight' or strategy pictures around a workplace help employees to see how they play a role.
- **Talk about the behaviours that will make a difference:** going the extra mile with clients, spotting potential new business opportunities, looking for process improvements, etc. Much of this might be standard practice – maybe the message is simply 'keep doing what we're doing'.
- **Let staff know what mandate they have for the likes of process improvement.**

“That ‘R’ word: staff want to hear about it – managers are reluctant to talk about it”

The must dos:

- **Provide people with context** (Market, company performance and your coping strategy)
- **Help people see their personal line-of-sight to company performance**
- **Keep messages simple, balanced and frank (but don't scare them!)**
- **Plan and coordinate your messages**
- **Regular Face: face comms is critical**



Keep messages simple, balanced and frank – but don't scare your staff!

- Be positive but don't 'sugar coat'
- Don't make promises that you won't be able to keep
- If you don't have the answers, tell them that
- Lose the management speak – people don't want to hear that your plan is for 'transformational change to be achieved through matrix teams deploying six-sigma'.... what's the plain English version!
- Don't keep bringing out a new 'burning platform' to scare people into action – it will lose its impact very quickly

Plan and coordinate your messages

Think about what you want to achieve, what the key messages need to be and what forum is going to be the most conducive. Think of this communication as an ongoing process and not something that needs to be downloaded in one hit.

Regular Face: face communication is critical

People need to have a dialogue to truly understand things and to gauge (body language) the honesty and sincerity of the communication. As they say 'you can't email a conversation'.

Too often leaders bunker down in their offices to avoid the tough conversations. Get out there – run face: face meetings, hold smaller 'coffee meetings' to make it easier for staff to ask questions and keep doing the MBWA (management by walking around).

And remember that these informal interactions are often the best way to measure the temperature on the shop floor and identify communication gaps that need to be plugged.

Leverage the important middle managers & team leaders (if you have them)

Spend extra time with middle managers and team leaders. It's a fact that most employee conversations are with these lowest-level-of-leaders and that leadership accounts for 50% of the success of internal communication. Equip them to have the right conversations.

Keeping in touch with your staff on client sites?

Good consultants embedded within client businesses need to be protected from coercion to jump onto the client's books or to jump across to other competitors that share the same client – particularly if the client is a public sector organisation that is perceived to be a safe haven to ride out the storm.

Some things to do:

- Step up the 1:1's with these staff – if they perceive the client is a better communicator than their own company then you've got a big problem
- Add in a regular chat on company performance
- Involve them more closely with client-care and business-development activities

A bit about Paul's background... he wasn't always a comms guy!

*I was lucky enough to start off my change management career seeing in the '87 crash and then spending the remainder of the 20th Century contributing to or leading change projects (including large restructures) at a major bank. I witnessed change over time, from various angles: as a productivity consultant redesigning work and roles; as project manager developing and managing large scale centralisation and process reengineering; as an operations manager of a processing centre with targets to improve service and productivity; managing expansion of the self-service channels and developing worker-displacement strategies; and as Head of HR Services charged with workforce planning and R&D into why people were leaving the organisation. A stint as HR Manager for a start-up SOE (which I helped shut down in 2000) was then followed by a period in the IT profession. I then focused on communications and change management across both private and public sectors. Quite a ride and an invaluable and eclectic education! **Paul***

For more information about any of the information and ideas in this paper feel free to contact me:

Paul Rayner, Director, Working Words (NZ) Ltd,

p: 04 2100 822 :m: 021 633 622

e: paul@workingwords.co.nz m: PO Box 12351 Thorndon, Wellington
The Business Centre, Radio NZ House, 155 The Terrace, Wellington



workingwords[®]
ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATORS

Copyright © 2009 Working Words (NZ) Ltd. All rights reserved