

What You Can Do to Help Employees in Uncertain Times.

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In these difficult times, employees will frequently look to their management teams for assurance or guidance as they work through their anxiety about the economy. Depending upon the company, employees may be anxious about their own immediate future or believe that the company could do more. Now is the time to provide assistance to whatever extent possible.

The first issues that companies should address are those rumors that are running rampant. Stories about possible reductions in force, reductions in benefits or reduced revenue should be addressed honestly by management and HR teams. If there is any validity to these rumors, meet them. If there are going to be layoffs or reductions in force, explain who will be affected, when people will be affected and what the organization is going to do to help its staff.

Even when you are closing a unit or a facility, it is possible to provide assistance and guidance that can grant positive returns. One company that I was responsible for closing had its most profitable quarter in its last quarter and we were able to place nearly 75% of the staff with local employers. It can be done. Similarly, if benefits need to be trimmed, hold employee meetings, explain the full impact and then move on. Uncertainty creates more anxiety.

If your organization does not have dire news to share, you can help in other ways. Show support for your employees by encouraging them to save for their future. Offer such programs as the following:

1. Arrange for people to buy savings bonds through payroll deduction.
2. Have a guest speaker from organizations such as the College Bound Fund program explain how it works and how easy it is to start to save.
3. Invite speakers who have knowledge about financial aid programs for college students. Contact a local college for assistance.
3. Have your 401k provider provide on-site informational programs. They will make themselves available in these times.
4. Make sure that your HR staff knows how 401k loans work or how to take a hardship withdrawal.
5. Provide Benefit Statements for Employees if you do not already do so.

There are other programs that you can adopt. As a member of the HR department, you can arrange car pooling. HR knows everyone's addresses and can obtain permission to organize car pooling

in different sections of the state. Every little bit helps. Helping them save on gas not only saves money, but improves camaraderie in the workplace. Allow for some flexibility with starting and ending times so that people can make use of car pooling. This will be especially helpful as RIPTA considers reducing or eliminating some of its routes.

If it is possible to be more flexible with work hours, now is the time. Let employees work their hours over 4 or 4.5 days a week. It may save on gas, child care and enable an employee to pick up a second job if possible. If people can work from home, let them make the arrangements. It will also save on gas, food, and day care costs. Even one day a week will do wonders for your employees' pocketbook and it will improve morale as well. Believe it or not, studies show that people working from home are just as effective if not more so depending upon the nature of their work.

If you need to use temps from time to time on an alternative shift, explore the idea of using your own staff. You can set up a second pay system for such work. It insures a knowledgeable worker and it will put money in the pockets of your own staff. They will not forget this.

For those employees who are struggling to pay their bills, arrange for your EAP staff to provide assistance and contact information on financial services that are available. Companies are more willing to negotiate terms of repayment than most employees understand. Your EAP can also help staff deal with the stress of this time period and more personal issues such as medical problems or issues with children.

Arranging for company discount programs that cost you nothing, but help employees is always a good idea. Buying in numbers will be a benefit. Invite speakers from service companies or "stores" to speak to your employees and then register them. The services can range from bulk warehouses to insurance products. In these times, these representatives will be happy to come out to your organization.

Push morale boosters when you can. Is there a company initiative going on right now such as improved productivity or enhanced customer service? If so, institute a spot award program to recognize those employees who really help out. These awards can be for such items as gas cards, grocery store cards, movie tickets, family restaurants, etc.

Work with your CEO or CFO to determine if your company can actually afford an emergency fund for employees. This may be a small pool of money that an employee can be given or lent in a difficult time. Develop appropriate criteria and continue to communicate that you care. Not only will it help that truly troubled employee, but it sends the message that the company cares.

Arrange for employees to share or pool their unused sick days for a co-worker in need. Again you will help an employee who is struggling and you continue to communicate that the company cares. If your company policy has been supportive of employee bulletin boards or swap information, allow for employees to help each other. Let employees post the information about the baby furniture that they want to sell. Someone else will need this. Employees will be happy to buy/ sell / or trade furniture, bikes, baby products, etc.

But above all else, walk around. Make sure that you know the issues and that you address them. Be a source of honest, accurate information. Bring issues of importance to your management team. Listen.