

Trust me, it will get better.....

Every day it seems that another household name announces redundancy consultations, site closures, business restructuring or some other form of consolidation in reaction to the current economic gloom. While it took a while for the UK to enter this recession "officially", the main talking point seems to be how quickly the downturn happened and how unprepared we were for it. Now everyone is feeling the pinch, and whether they are biting the bullet or waiting for the other shoe to drop, no-one seems immune to metaphors.

Under current conditions, it's hard to imagine that recruitment and retention will ever re-emerge as significant challenges. However, markets will recover and confidence will return, bringing new opportunities for businesses and a welcome return to real career choices for individuals. But, for those organisations whose employees are still smarting from the necessary but painful austerity measures of recent months, those career choices may leave them vulnerable to attrition and less fit to compete in the upturn.

The organisations that bounced back fastest from previous recessions were those that grasped the reality of the situation and began adapting early. Commentators and business leaders are already talking about "post-recession planning" and the "turnaround" leadership skills needed to fill the void created by the erosion of trust in management. Jargon abounds, but the underlying message is very simple: now and for the immediate future, trust will be a key pre-requisite for success.

What do we mean by trust and why it is

critical to future success? Although compliance is important, trust is not about complying with laws or regulations. Trust is about aligning everything we mean and say with everything we value and do. The CEO of a world-beating global corporation summed this up perfectly when he said that his company "deals with everyone with absolute integrity. We play by all the rules, we stand by our word, we mean what we say, we say what we mean". Unfortunately the CEO in question was Kenneth Lay and he was describing Enron. But who knows how the story would have ended if the actions of Enron's leaders had really been aligned to their stated values!?

So, what can organisations do about trust? We believe that there is no one "right" approach, but that three simple steps are necessary to take us back to basics and our ABC's and Three R's:

Acknowledge the Reality

Some things that need to be done to survive in a recession can damage trust and confidence. Attempts to restrict information and a failure to engage with the reality of people's disappointment, frustration or anger damages respect and heightens uncertainty. Leaders need to be honest about their intentions, and they need to listen to staff; helping to counter false rumours and to clarify expectations. It's not always easy to talk at a time like this, and so Step One is to establish ways and means of gathering a

true picture of how the workforce feels about recent events and decisions. This might involve confidentially-facilitated focus groups, one-to-one interviews with key personnel and staff surveys, for example.

Build honest Relationships

In all of the trust and turn-around leadership literature there is a lot of talk about something we perhaps instinctively know to be true – that openness and transparency are vital to cement longstanding relationships. Step Two involves going beyond merely acknowledging reality to making positive moves to "right-wrongs" and repairing damaged reputations and loyalty. Again, this isn't easy but damage can be repaired through facilitated "away days" and workshops; helping teams to build, or re-build, cohesion and to articulate ways of working together in the future.

Commit to delivering Results

Step Three is to deliver; to make good on commitments and promises by doing things differently or better. People may need support to bring about the required changes; they may need to alter their own style and behaviour significantly in order to deliver. Organisation-wide development programmes, 360 degree feedback or one-to-one coaching may come into play, and "before and after" measures that quantify improvements should be used. But whatever the particulars of the approach in any given organisation, the single most critical thing is to close the loop and deliver the new and improved reality.

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