

How to Keep Your Employees Happy and Productive in the Midst of a Recession

By Donna LaMar, PhD, and Betsy Laney

In light of today's economic landscape, it's more important than ever for companies to have happy and productive employees. When employees are loyal and engaged in the company, profits are higher. Conversely, when people feel unmotivated or undervalued, the company suffers. Additionally, studies show that engaged employees miss less work, perform better, and are more supportive of changes and willing to make them happen.

But keeping employees happy in any economy is hard work. Why? Because happiness is, primarily, an inside job. In other words, happiness comes from within a person. However, friends, family and employment can add to or detract from someone's happiness level. So if the workplace is stressful and/or painful things are happening, such as "back-stabbing" and gossiping, employees' production goes down.

Happy employees are also satisfied and feel a sense of accomplishment in their work. They like themselves and what they do, and they find satisfaction from their work—a sense that what they do is important and meaningful. Such feelings reduce stress, which is a major factor of productivity.

In order to make your workplace one where happiness and productivity thrive, consider the following guidelines.

Be a "Good" Employer

A "good" employer is one who sets clear expectations to employees, including what is to be done, when it is to be done by, and where it goes after they complete their responsibilities. Within these expectations, you need to set clear boundaries, demonstrate healthy leadership and provide sound direction. This means spelling out rules, regulations, policies and procedures. While you can usually accomplish this by creating a comprehensive employee manual, a good employer or manager will also use the "personal touch" by talking with employees in a group and in one-on-one settings.

Whatever expectations you set, make sure they are consistent with all employees. Include such things as clocking-in early, break times, lunch hours, etc. For example, is it acceptable to clock in early and leave work early? Are breaks mandatory? Will an employee be "docked" if they consistently take too long for lunch? The more issues and expectations you outline, the fewer problems arise, which leads to productive workers.

Help Employees to Feel Valued

Be encouraging to your employees and offer praise when appropriate. Thank employees for doing a good job and let them know that you value them. Should something go wrong or someone makes a mistake, don't "punish" the person. Rather, talk to the person, teach

the correct procedures and offer encouragement and further teaching when needed. Remember that punishing people only makes things worse in that the employee may become angry and bitter and may want to sabotage their work to get back at the company. If errors continue after correction, then you may need to evaluate that person to make sure he or she is a good fit for the job.

As an employer, you have an excellent opportunity to make a difference in your employees' lives. This may mean a smile, asking how their family is or asking about their interests or problems. If you sense that someone is depressed, help that person get the necessary resources, as employees with depression have higher absenteeism, increased health problems and decreased performance. Remember that we are all humans working together to get through life. We need to care about each other to get the best results.

Create a Productive Atmosphere

The physical layout of the office is important to maximizing productivity. People need enough room to work, the correct supplies/materials and a comfortable and pleasant environment. Make sure all equipment is designed ergonomically so that it positively motivates workers by helping them with their needs to do the work.

Ecotherapy is another element of a productive environment. Some factors of ecotherapy include:

- Make sure the environment has live green plants. People feel better about themselves, their jobs, and the work they perform when they feel a connection to nature around them. In fact, workers who are near plants or windows report significantly higher job, boss, and co-worker satisfaction than those without. They also report being happier. If live plants are not an option, pictures or murals of outdoor scenes have some benefit.
- Give employees healthy air to breathe. Indoor air pollution is a serious problem in buildings. Change air filters regularly, and if appropriate, allow employees to keep their windows open.
- Utilize real sunlight when possible. If offices or workspaces don't have window access, install full spectrum or plant light bulbs in all fixtures, including overhead florescent lights.
- Offer healthy food choices in the cafeteria or break room. Healthy food helps people think better, improves mood and increases energy levels. Do a healthy food challenge at work to encourage people to eat better. Also, have a restaurant bring in healthy food occasionally for a catered lunch.
- Allow employees to personalize their work space, within reason. We all need a place to call our own.
- Make the workplace family friendly. Life balance is a major stressor for people. Therefore, allow workers to take time off for school events or to stay home with mildly ill children without using sick or vacation days. If possible, offer child care near or on premise. Research has shown the employer can subsidize the care because it saves so much money from decreased absenteeism. Offer 13 weeks of maternity leave and also some

paternity leave, and have elder care resources and referral services and/or dependent care assistance plans in place.

Get People Involved

Create a comprehensive employee manual that is clear and simply written. In it include procedures for handling every imaginable scenario, including family emergencies. Ask employees for their ideas for the manual so they feel a sense of ownership with the company.

Additionally, help employees feel involved by having regular meetings where everyone can voice their opinions and concerns. This has an added benefit in that the company can gain valuable information about products and concerns that will hurt the bottom line. Also, host special employee events where the family can be involved, such as picnics, fairs, workshops, etc. The more sense of “family” you can create, the more productive people will be.

Finally, have a designated charity where people can donate both money and time. This helps each person to see the larger picture. Research indicates that people feel better and have better lives when they volunteer. It also helps the company’s bottom line by increasing employees’ performance and demonstrating to the community that the company cares.

Keep ‘Em Happy; Keep ‘Em Working

When workers feel that they are a dynamic and essential part of the team, they are more productive and willing to go the extra mile for their customers and co-workers. Therefore, give praise openly, set goals appropriate to the work and always take your employees’ needs seriously. By respecting and listening to your staff, you’ll be giving them the motivational push they need to stay loyal and committed to the company’s goals. And when you have a happy and productive workforce that is eager to contribute, your company can weather any economic storm.

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