

Rally Your Employees in Tough Times: Point Toward a Better Future By Chris Witt

The economy isn't in the best shape. Maybe you've noticed. Your employees certainly have.

The bad news—job losses, home foreclosures, bankruptcies, and a tanking stock market—comes, in the words of Shakespeare, not single file but in battalions. And prognostications by economists (how bad will it get? how long will it last?) provide little comfort. “This has translated into less productivity at work,” according to a report by CNN, “because of anxieties about salary, heavy workload, and job security.”

What's a boss to do?

There is no easy answer, no quick fix, no one solution. But business leaders at every level – from CEOs to line managers – can do something to address their employees' worries and to rekindle their motivation. They can give a speech.

A speech in difficult times can be anything from a formal company-wide address to casual remarks at the start of a new shift. But the intent is always the same: to keep employees focused, motivated and working hard.

To make your speech more motivating, follow these guidelines:

- **Lead with the facts.** Be as open, honest and forthcoming as possible. Give a complete account of the situation as objectively as you can. If you hold anything back or if you are evasive, you will feed your employees' fear and compromise your credibility.
- **Acknowledge people's feelings.** You don't want to turn your speech in to a therapy session, handing out Kleenex and encouraging people to have a good cry. But if you ignore your employees' feelings, they will think that you're out of touch or, worse, that you don't care. Acknowledge their feelings in a general way, using broadly applicable words like *difficulties*, *worries*, *concerns*, *anxieties* or *fears*. Acknowledge what people are feeling and move on. Say, if not in words, then by your empathy, “I care.”
- **Interpret the facts.** In spite of what is often said, the facts don't speak for themselves. It's your responsibility as a leader to gather the facts (all the facts), evaluate them, analyze them and come to some understanding of what they mean. And then it's your responsibility to share your understanding with your employees. Just don't tell them, for example, sales have declined 30 percent; tell them what a 30 percent drop in sales means. Help them understand what's going on.

- **Create a positive metaphor.** “Yes, these are tough times,” the manager at a defense contracting company told his employees, “but we’ve been through tough times before. We’re battle-tested veterans. We don’t give up. And we leave no one behind.” That metaphor – battle-tested veterans who don’t give up – resonated with his employees and renewed their determination. Be sure that the image you choose is one that you personally believe in and that your employees can adopt.

- **Make hope sensible.** You can’t counteract concrete negative images – homes being foreclosed, people losing jobs, businesses closing down – with abstract positive concepts like perseverance, resolve and dedication. If you want people to believe in hope, you have to make it *sensible*, which means according to the dictionary “perceptible by the senses or the mind.” The best way to show people images of hope is by telling them stories.

- **Be action oriented.** It’s counterproductive at best to say, “You’re wrong to think like that” or “You shouldn’t feel that way.” You can’t change how people think or feel – only they can do that – but you can change how they act. And by changing how they act, you create the possibility that they’ll change their thoughts and feelings. Almost a century ago William James, the philosopher and psychologist, made an assertion that has been long since been proven: “Actions seem to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not.”

- **Don’t go overboard.** This isn’t the time – people aren’t in the mood – for pep rallies and rah-rah-isn’t-everything-great celebrations. Tell anxious people to cheer up and put on a happy face, and they’ll be less, not more, likely to do so. Be ebullient, and you’ll be unbelievable. Instead, be confident, positive and purposeful.

- **Say what you want and explain why they want it too.** Tell your employees in a short, simple sentence exactly what you want them to do. Then show them how doing what you want will help them achieve what they want. If you want them to work longer or harder or in a different way, you have to figure out how they will benefit from doing so. What’s in it for them?

- **“Be the change you wish to see.”** The words of Gandhi are as true today in the corporate world as they were 50 years ago in India. Your employees don’t simply listen to your words. They filter everything you say through their experience of you. Your actions, attitude, and interactions with them are more than an example for them to follow; they are also the lasting message people will take away from your talk.

- **Tell the truth.** Part of why the economy is in such sad shape – not the entire reason, but part of the reason – is because some prominent leaders have been

mistaken, unreliable or downright dishonest. People aren't as willing as they once were to take the word of their leaders. You have to prove your trustworthiness. If you say anything that your listeners doubt, they will doubt everything you say.

As a leader, it's part of your job to rally your employees in trying times and point them toward a better future. What better way to do that than with a well-executed speech?

If the challenge of giving such a speech – positive, inspirational *and* truthful – seems overwhelming, consider this: Your employees want you to succeed. They don't want to slog through their days, depressed and anxious. They want you to help them keep hope alive.

As an executive speech coach with more than 25 years of professional experience, Chris Witt is author of the newly released book, "Real Leaders Don't Do PowerPoint," and founder of Witt Communications. He helps CEOs gain board approval and company-wide support for initiatives, empowers newly promoted managers, helps technical experts simplify their presentations to win multi-million dollar contracts, and enables entrepreneurs to grow their businesses through the power of effective speaking and presenting. For more information about his services, call 619-295-8411 or visit www.wittcom.com.