

Rebuilding Business: Aligning to Goals

BY SCOTT BLANCHARD

Now that the dust has settled, it's time to assess the situation and prepare for the future.

The economy, and the expectations that people have for it, have fundamentally changed. Slight to moderate growth is the new normal; gone are the days of double-digit profits. As a result, companies are not looking to increase the number of people they are hiring. Instead, they're trying to rebuild sales and profitability by using existing staff.

This causes a strange mix of emotions in the workplace. While people who have survived layoffs feel good that they have jobs, they are still somewhat unsure about the future. In all likelihood, they're waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The challenge for companies, then, is to move people beyond this fear and uncertainty and start planning for the future again.

Mission: Re-Engage and Revive

Fear, anxiety and uncertainty erode engagement, passion and productivity. Organizations need to find a way to get employees who are too inwardly focused moving forward again. That means managing the state of mind — and heart — of these workers.

The first thing to keep in mind is that the workforce is made up of humans — and in addition to skills and abilities, humans have aspirations, hopes and dreams. While many leaders might insist that employees should be happy just to have a job right now, that sentiment isn't what drives high levels of performance. What drives high levels of performance is having a good relationship with your manager and your co-workers; feeling secure, trusted and recognized for your work; and feeling confident that you can deliver outstanding results.

When employees experience these conditions in their work environment, they report higher levels of work passion, which translates into longer-term retention, increased productivity and better use of discretionary energy. While leaders need to take a hard look at whether they have the right people with the right skills in the right jobs, they also must

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Driving Performance

In addition to meeting employees' emotional needs, leaders also must get people focused and working on the right things again. For senior executives, this means understanding the important role that vision and alignment play in motivating people to higher levels of performance.

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Employees come to work for three reasons:

1. To make money.
2. To be productive, contributing members of society.
3. To be part of something bigger than themselves.

That said, there are a lot of people these days who aren't thinking too much beyond whether they are going to survive. What leaders need to do is take people to a higher-level viewpoint so they can feel engaged and be excited about the recovery. To do that, leaders must focus on catalyzing employees around a shared and renewed vision that charts the course back to prosperity.

However, transitioning from a "survival" to a "growth" mindset can be challenging. How do you take a weary and sometimes frustrated group of people who have been waiting for the bottom to hit and get them refocused with high amounts of work passion so they can contribute to the or-

ganization's recovery? Leaders looking to help their people make this shift have to focus on three key areas: defining reality, setting a clear direction and managing energy.

Define reality. Leaders must acknowledge the company's current position — both internally and externally — and communicate this situation to the workforce. Otherwise, employees may believe that leaders are out of touch or, worse, that they are deliberately manipulating the truth. People understand the challenges of today's economy, and it is reassuring for them to see their senior leaders are honest and open about it.

That said, it's important to strike a healthy, realistic balance when communicating the current situation. Executives don't want to lead people on with overly optimistic promises, but on the flip side, if they are too gloomy and pessimistic, people will lose confidence in the organization's potential.

Set a clear direction. The second step is to chart a course. As companies waited for the bottom to hit, everything necessarily shifted to short-term survival. Now that the recession has somewhat stabilized, leaders should ask themselves: What are our plans for moving forward? After all, leadership is about going somewhere.

To move employees out of the inertia caused by worry, leaders need to show them where the organization is going. There is tremendous opportunity in recovery to boost market share, increase productivity and possibly even leapfrog the competition. For that to happen, however, leaders must put an action plan in place and communicate that action plan clearly.

Manage people's energy. The third step in getting people back on track is to pay special attention to how they are feeling. This means acknowledging

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their current feelings as well as giving them hope and getting them excited about the future.

Learning leaders should schedule one-on-one conversations to facilitate this, keeping in mind that it is the quality of the interaction that will guide people's energy. Managers must be confident and compassionate in how they approach challenging conversations and conflict. They also need to develop effective listening skills and recognize that they are an important link to the employee's feeling of trust in the organization.

During these conversations, managers can also identify the needs of each of their direct reports and tailor their management style to build morale, efficiency and productivity. Authentic conversations also leave employees feeling good not only about their managers, but also about the direction of the company.

The Power of Alignment

Once vision is set, leaders must focus on getting everybody aligned and moving in the same direction. Vision sets the course, but alignment clarifies the objectives.

One challenge in this area is to differentiate between near-term, mission-critical objectives and those that have to wait — or even be abandoned. Leaders must take a cold, hard look at their goals for the company and identify the few that are crucial to help the organization move forward.

Once that is established, senior executives must enlist rank-and-file leaders throughout the organization to spread the message. This means encouraging them to get a firsthand look at what's going on in the company, giving them a clear message on their priorities and promoting accountability and coaching.

The business environment is at an important

inflection point. This is not the time to “wait and see.” This is the time to look ahead and ask, How are we going to participate in the recovery, and how are we going to align all leaders in the business so their influence and energies are moving in the right direction?

People respond to clear, explicit and linked goals — not vague ideas. If people are not clear on the direction the organization is heading and how they can contribute, they are going to stand still or march off in their own direction.

Leadership Matters

In times of crisis, leadership is even more critical. These days, there is not much room for middle-of-the-road performance. The strongest companies — those with the greatest leadership capacity — are the ones that are going to come out on top. And the organizations that are not taking these challenges seriously are going to be the ones that either fail or end up in a marginal position.

Anxiety and uncertainty will only get worse if they are not addressed. Leaders must set a clear vision, show employees how they fit into the plans and address their concerns. Otherwise, they risk remaining stuck where they are, or worse, regressing.

Good things don't happen by themselves in the workforce. For organizations willing to actively move forward by investing and growing the capability of their people instead of standing put, the rewards will be substantial. **CLO**

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