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Wanted: Managers who coach well in crisis

Leaders can have biggest emotional impact on employees

Never before has it been so important for managers at all levels to really engage in coaching their staff. With the economic crisis and its continuing impact on organizations, many organizations are trimming costs, including head count.

The recent suicides of formerly successful financial players, such as German billionaire Adolph Merkle, serve to demonstrate the severity of concern in this economy.

It is often said that worry about a potentially adverse outcome is worse than the outcome itself.

Global studies are documenting the increase of stress levels on the job. A recent study of almost 5,000 workers in the United Kingdom, in collaboration with staffing firm Robert Half, revealed 45 per cent of respondents suffered from work-related stress. Respondents also highlighted several causes: unachievable targets (33 per cent), poor management (38 per cent) and poor work-life balance (41 per cent).

The questions we need to ask now are, "What impact is this having on productivity" and "What can managers and organizations do to coach through the impact?"

What managers must understand

To be better coaches through these times, there are a few things managers must understand.

First, emotions are contagious, as documented by Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*. Since people watch managers, it is indeed the boss who has the biggest emotional impact. Does she appear



GUEST COMMENTARY

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stressed, worried and fearful? Or is she energized, relaxed and confident in this economic climate? One observation often made of United States President Barack Obama throughout his campaign was he appeared calm and confident in the face of opposition, and he inspired these emotions in the electorate.

Second, managers must recognize how crucial it is for them to coach. Before expanding on this, it's important to define "coaching," since it often means different things to different people. Think of "coach" as it is used in the term "stagecoach." This early form of horse-drawn transportation picked people up and transported them to their desired destination. Likewise coaching, as a strategic, questioning-based dialogue, assists people in getting from where they are to where they want or need to be in terms of goals and accomplishment.

5 ways to coach effectively

So what can be done to help staff through these challenging times? Here are five ways managers can coach more effectively:

Listen to understand: Acknowledge staff concerns. Some may carry a heavy load as job demands increase along with de-

mands at home — from busy children's schedules to ailing parents. Some may even be experiencing financial troubles due to a spouse's job loss.

Give affirmation: At the end of the day, organizations don't achieve results, people do. Let staff know you're all in the same boat, you appreciate their efforts and are confident in their abilities to work through organizational challenges.

Engage them: Ask what they think they could be doing to be more effective. This represents an important start to creative and innovative thinking. Sometimes it is helpful to ask them to provide a list of 10 to 20 possible actions. Encourage your staff to be creative and produce a quantity of ideas you can later look at together and evaluate for quality.

Help them make a plan: From the list of possibilities, ask them which two or three of the most practical actions they would like to commit to. These could be new habits at work or beyond. Managers with strong relationships and good coaching skills can help employees make personal changes that translate to less stress in their lives overall, and consequently greater productivity at work.

I know of one manager who coached an individual through some issues around significant personal debt, at the employee's request. The manager simply asked him to consider possible options, which they evaluated together. The employee chose to sell his vehicle and rent out his basement, allowing him to retire substantial credit card debt and avoid looming bankruptcy. Was he happier and more productive at work? You bet.

Asking which goals and actions employees will commit to

is important, because it helps them focus on things within their control. Psychologists document that when we focus on the "external locus of control" (things beyond our control) we experience more stress and feelings of helplessness. When we focus on the "internal locus of control" (things within our control) we feel empowered and less stressed. Essentially, as a coach, you engage them as you guide them to focus on solutions versus problems.

In some cases, some of your employees' action goals may require your support where available. For example, a change to flex time to accommodate day-care drop-off in the mornings can go a long way. I also know of a manager who gave an employee, who was a single mom, gift certificates for a home maid service during a busy quarter at work.

Think holistically: The best coaches are creative and consider the whole person. Encourage staff to try and develop a regular exercise schedule they enjoy. From morning walks to gym visits, consistent exercise goes a long way towards reducing stress and enhancing productivity.

The next several years will be tough on organizations. Keep in mind the best leaders cannot make a chair, computer or desk appreciate in value over time. However, a great leader can enhance the value of her people by coaching them to be more effective, engaged and productive through times of change. Organizations that develop superior coaching talent will not only survive, but thrive.

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