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# Publishing Executive

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## Low Staff Morale?

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By Cynthia Kincaid

14 ways to motivate your staff during difficult times.

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Add a note...

The publishing industry is feeling the effects of the economic recession, and keeping your employees motivated amid significant budget cuts and layoffs can be a tall order. Still, with the right attitude and a few important actions, you can help your workers engage and even thrive in their jobs.

The first key action is to set the proper emotional tone.

“You have to show leadership,” says Helen Berman, president of The Helen Berman Corp. “You may be scared to death, but once you walk into the office, everyone is taking your emotional temperature. Word goes out instantly on how the publisher is doing, and people take their cue from that.”

Louise Kiernan, client services director for corporate-talent development company Sherwood Learning Solutions in Fairfield, N.J., agrees that a confident and welcoming attitude from management is critical. “It’s the manager [who] makes [people] feel like they want to come to work every day,” she says. “And how they motivate people is to make [the employees’] day-to-day work as satisfying and rewarding as possible.”

### **Acknowledge the Challenges**

As gloom and doom saturates the daily news, publishers need to be honest with their staff about the state of the company both fiscally and organizationally. “Acknowledge the elephant in the room, because employees are not stupid,” says Kiernan. “They know that times are difficult, and if you don’t acknowledge that, anything you say after that will be discredited.”

Not surprisingly, employees are worried about their jobs and want reassurance, says Bob Olree, publisher of *MAN-Modern Applications News*. “If employees see a downward trend of things happening, they definitely become concerned and worried about their own jobs,” he says. “Be sincere and open. Be a real person to them.”

However, revealing less-than-stellar news to employees needs a balanced

approached, says Berman. “You don’t want to be Pollyanna and tell everyone that everything is OK, because they know it’s not,” she says. “And you don’t want to be Chicken Little either. You have to take a realistic assessment of what’s going on.”

### **Listen ... and Ask for Help**

Smart publishers recognize that their employees can be a virtual gold mine of ideas and talents, and now is the time to ask for help. With the right encouragement, these employees will be motivated to contribute, adding great value to a company’s operations.

By keeping employees in the loop, letting them know the challenges that the business faces and asking for input not only motivates them to be a part of the solution, but also opens the door for them to grow personally and professionally. “If they like you and they like the job, they are more apt to be sympathetic to what you’re going through and come up with some interesting ideas on how things can change,” says Olree.

Often, success in this area involves sincere listening. “Employees have great ideas; they have great brains,” says Olree. “People want to be valued and feel a part of the operation, so listen to them, value their input and utilize them. Make them feel part of the business, which they are.”

Roger Dusing, vice president of human resources for Ascend Media, believes that employees also need to be given the autonomy required to best contribute to the organization. “The people who are in the trenches, doing the work every day, are the ones saying, ‘This is a waste of my time, and if I don’t have to do that, then I can do this instead,’” he says. “In times like this, it is really incumbent on the individual to say, ‘Here’s my idea.’” Publishers who are receptive to this kind of employee input are going to gain in the long run.

Employee motivation also can result from taking old problems and looking at them anew. “We get stuck in a this-is-the-way-we’ve-always-done-it mentality,” says Kiernan. “If you [enlist] somebody with a new pair of eyes and new skills, they will come up with stuff. You don’t have to buy it all, but think about how engaged the employee will be.”

### **Offer More Training**

Savvy publishers also are using this time to better train their editorial and sales staffs to keep skills sharp. “We are putting a lot more [emphasis] on training, and people see that we are taking the time to retrain,” says Bob Wiemers, operations director, magazine division for Boy Scouts of America.

Additional training can provide the opportunity for employees to motivate and support each other while learning valuable skills, suggests Berman. “There needs to be more togetherness, more meetings and more sales training,” she says. “If you thought you needed to work with your people last year in sales training, you really

need to now because you need that group support. It also may be a time for publishers and ad directors to jump into sales a little bit more, especially on big accounts.”

### **Enhance Their Skills**

By giving employees more responsibility across skill sets, publishers can benefit from reaping more with less, while giving employees the chance to build more robust résumés. Given this chance, most employees will feel compelled to grow professionally, while also bettering the organization.

“This is a time that employees can start gaining new skills, and employees and employers who are willing to do that will both win significantly,” says Jim Ponder, president and CEO of Turnkey Strategic Relations in Escondido, Calif. In other words, rather than telling employees they are going to start having to do more work, reframe the approach as a win-win. “Tell employees, ‘We’re going to invest in you and teach you new skills ...,’” says Ponder. “They’re going to be a little out of the ordinary, but this is going to strengthen you personally and professionally.”

Kiernan says that motivation also can come from allowing employees to learn from one another. “By letting employees learn from each other, and letting them find out the competencies required on [certain] jobs, you’re going to develop people in your culture,” she says. “That creates employee retention and loyalty, increases morale, and lets you start developing your new leaders.”

### **Reward and Compensate**

Of course, compensation and reward are always a part of employee motivation, but money may not be the driving force in spurring your employees. In many cases, recognition goes as far as a small pay raise. “You can give employees a gift card or time off for a job well done,” says Kiernan. “The employee sees that you’re making an effort to reward them ... when money is tight.”

Ponder also stresses the importance of celebrating the little victories along the way. “The No. 1 motivator has never been money; it’s always been self-esteem,” he says. “Order a pizza, high-five each other. If you celebrate the little victories as they come, they will build on themselves.”

Olree agrees. “Take them out to a good dinner every six months and show them that their contribution is really appreciated,” he says. “It doesn’t have to break the bank.”

Sometimes, however, compensation is the issue. In that case, says Berman, with sales staff at least, some restructuring of compensation may be in order. “You might change the way you’re compensating salespeople and start emphasizing market share,” she said. “That keeps them fighting hard against the competitive set, while taking into consideration the reality of your clients’ marketplace.”

She also stresses that the company may have to come up with dollars in the short

term for long-term gain. “There’s a certain amount of bailout that the company may have to consider, especially with top salespeople, because you don’t want to lose them,” she says. “Publishing costs may go up in that area, so this is a time to be honest with yourself and with salespeople as to who is really producing.”

Ultimately, the most motivating thing to do may be adhering to the golden rule of just acknowledging people and treating them with respect. “If you treat people like they are family, train them, take care of them and tell them they are valuable, it helps morale, and they won’t want to go anywhere,” says Wiemers. “We keep employees by making sure they know they are making a contribution.”

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### **14 Tips to Help Keep Your Staff Happy**

- 1.** Be positive. Set the proper emotional tone.
- 2.** Be honest and open. Don’t sugarcoat the challenges.
- 3.** Keep employees in the loop.
- 4.** Ask them for their ideas to solve problems.
- 5.** Take their suggestions seriously.
- 6.** Give people autonomy to make decisions about how their time is best spent.
- 7.** Invest in staff training to keep their skills leading-edge. This helps them as well as the company.
- 8.** Encourage group meetings where staff can support one another with ideas and encouragement.
- 9.** Give employees more responsibilities across various skill sets. This helps the employees’ personal development while

the company is able to achieve more with less.

- 10.** Foster a culture where employees learn from one another.
- 11.** Recognize staff with a day off, a gift card, dinner or other small token of appreciation. These can go a long way to boost morale when money is tight.
- 12.** Celebrate small victories.
- 13.** Consider restructuring your compensation packages for sales staff.
- 14.** Treat people with respect.

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