

10 critical activities to leverage talent and grow your business during the recession

By Jenni Murphy-Scanlon

One certain thing about a recession is that an upturn will follow. And when it does it will be critical to have talented, committed and experienced people in your business. During a recession it is easy to look at cost cutting as the first line of defence, and this usually means the extreme measure of redundancies, or at least reducing training and development, salaries and/or working conditions. These are a poor formula for maintaining or developing loyalty and commitment in your people. So what are some practical ways you can include your people to help you survive or even thrive during the recession?

1. **Tap into staff networks to find new markets.** Your people may be from a variety of backgrounds - different ages, countries, social groups, hobbies and interests and professional backgrounds. All these potentially offer new markets and customers. You may have a staff member who is expert with web tools and could develop your presence on facebook, twitter or similar. If this is handled well it can bring in a considerable number of customers that you could not find in one place. Staff from other countries or with contacts in other countries may be able to help you identify markets there and even

have networks to help you distribute and sell there. Some hobby groups have significant memberships and a %age donation to their club or group discount could attract members to your business. Talk with your people and get their ideas. You might be surprised!

2. **Deliver excellent customer service.** There is no time like the present to absolutely ensure you are giving excellent customer service to key customers and customer groups. Make sure everyone understands what great customer service is in your organisation, and the decision-making authority they have. The more your staff are able to make decisions on the spot, the better for the customer, so give them clear guidelines and boundaries and let them decide how to best delight the customer. If you can possibly reward your staff (not just sales staff) for bringing in new customers and for retaining customers then do it. The more your staff are working for you in this area the better for your business.
3. **Implement strategy.** I'm assuming here that you have key strategies. If not, this is a critical time to have them, so developing strategic goals should be your first priority. Just having them on the

will is not enough though. No-one in your business can make good decisions if they don't understand your organisation's strategies and values and how they can contribute to them. It is not enough for your people to know what to do, in fact this rarely aids the implementation of strategy, but they must know how to do it. It is the way in which each person carries out their tasks and makes decisions that determines the achievement of strategy.

4. **Identify high potentials.** In order to target resources effectively it is critical to have identified your high potential staff. These are the people who have the desire to step up to more responsibility in your organisation and that you believe have the potential to do so, or people who are in critical roles and are highly skilled and difficult to replace. It's not that you don't develop other staff but you focus more of your resources on developing and retaining these people, as they are the ones you can least afford to lose.
5. **Ask your people to identify new recruits.** When you find yourself needing to recruit you can reduce time and costs and increase your chances of getting suitable applicants by tapping into your own staff networks. Unless you are a government organisation covered by the State Sector Act, you are probably not obliged to publicly advertise every vacancy. So before spending time and money ask your staff to use their own networks to find you some potential staff. Once you get applicant CVs you can shortlist and go through your normal selection process. You might offer some reward to those who refer people you shortlist. Take

particular interest in the people referred by your high potentials, as they are likely to also be high potentials (we generally mix with people like us).

6. **Gather market intelligence.** Most organisations have a vastly untapped source of information about their markets in their own staff who deal with customers, suppliers and any other external agencies. Every day the people who talk to people outside your organisation are gathering market intelligence that could indicate potential new products or services, potential new markets and competitor information. Usually they have no effective way of passing this information to the right people. Run focus groups with your staff and ask them what customers ask for that they can't deliver, what types of customer requests they refer to other organisations, complaints they get from customers and the main issues that arise with suppliers. Decide between you the best way for them to record this type of information on a continual basis so that you can glean ideas and track trends.
7. **Tap into their strengths.** If you don't know the strengths of your staff, this is definitely a good time to find out. Ask them what they like doing best, what they think they are good at and why, and which tasks they find most motivating. Look at all the tasks and activities you currently carry out in your organisation and the things you would like to be doing or doing more of. Is there a better way to use your people's strengths and interests? You might have someone in a back room function who is really good with customers. You may get better value from them by moving

them to a customer service role and letting someone else do the back room tasks. A common issue that occurs with this process is pay differentials across roles. You may need some professional advice to reallocate tasks if your pay system is highly structured or you are in a unionised environment. It is well worth it though if it lets your people build your business for you and keeps them motivated and loyal.

8. **Identify wastage.** In my experience what we focus on, we get more of, and so I rarely recommend that businesses focus on negative issues or problems unless they are holding back the organisation; and then only to the extent needed to fix them, preferably by focusing on the opposite and positive aspects. However if you feel strongly that your costs are out of alignment, ask your people to identify wastage and opportunities to reduce costs. They will almost always have some excellent suggestions. Implement as many suggestions as quickly as you can, then get your focus back to achieving your organisational strategy.
9. **Increase engagement and motivation.** It is quite common for organisations to carry out expensive staff engagement or climate surveys to discover things they could have found out just by asking. And it is quite common for the most demotivating issues to be resolved with a change of behaviour and little money spent. Often people's biggest gripes with their jobs are lack of positive feedback, lack of appreciation or recognition and not being able to do enough of the work they like or

are good at. Don't let these motivation drainers exist in your organisation.

10. **Leverage the value in learning activities and professional memberships.** When you do invest money in development activities, make sure you are getting good value. Insist that the providers of the activities assess actual learning that occurs on the programme and report back to you, and make sure that your people get the support to implement their learning back in your business. The same applies to professional memberships that you might pay for. When your people attend events or receive professional journals make sure they are bringing ideas back and implementing them in your organisation. And make good use of the networks and website information that is available through their professional organisations.

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