

## **10 Ways to Boost Morale and Productivity**

**By**

**Emily Ross**

This article appeared in Smart Company, 16 April, 2009.

It's hard to have happy, productive staff in a climate when the bad news just keeps on rolling. The good news is, there are cheap and easy ways to increase productivity (and smiles) in the workplace.

### **Lesson 1: Get out and walk the floor**

Deloitte human capital partner NSW, Nicola Wakefield, says job cuts are on the mind of most of her clients. "They have either done it, are about to do it, or thinking about it," she says.

When these cuts are on the radar, many managers actively avoid face-to-face time with staff, casual conversations, private or group meetings. "They [managers] stop walking the floors," she says. "They are scared they will have to sack people."

Instead of working with all staff to get through this tough time, some managers choose to shut down. A communication breakdown occurs, ruining opportunities to work out of the downturn. "Staff absolutely want to talk about what is going on in the market," she says. Open, honest communication is crucial.

### **Lesson 2: Morale boosting doesn't have to cost the earth**

Having happy workers is something that Carolyn Creswell takes extremely seriously. The founder of Carman's Fine Foods, Creswell has several homegrown strategies for

boosting morale that include employing a part-time "office nanny" whose role includes arranging coffees, waters and take-away lunches for staff, as well as filing and answering calls while staff take a lunch break.

Each day, at the end of lunch, the 14 head office staff get together and take a daily current affairs quiz published in a daily newspaper. "We all get out of our work headspace for a few minutes and laugh our heads off," says Creswell, who believes these initiatives boost productivity. "We get a lot done with a highly motivated group of people," she says.

### **Lesson 3: Ask and you shall know**

Every Friday, Creswell's company pays for a lunch, delivered to a meeting room from a local restaurant. At the lunch, among other business, each member of the 14 staff must answer two questions:

- How many emails are there in your in-box?
- One a scale of one to 10, how stressed are you?

These two pieces of information are extremely useful. Staff can stay connected to each other, recognise other people's needs, help out overloaded colleagues, workloads can be adjusted, and Creswell can monitor how well her team is coping and how well each individual copes with stress and organising themselves.

Deloitte's Wakefield recommends taking these open conversations a step further, to asking all staff a simple but critical question: In this market situation, what can we do?

### **Lesson 4: It's not about you**

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen warns that in tough times leaders can become "disproportionally focused on their own needs, wants and disinclinations".

When work teams are not communicating openly, trust and confidence in colleagues dissipates, and morale plummets.

In this economy, companies are fighting for survival, reducing costs and trying to develop better operating models.

A critical ingredient in the innovation process is knowledge sharing. If staff are not collaborating across the organisation to come up with ways to solve problems and improve the business, how can a business grow?

### **Lesson 5: Timing is everything**

There is actually a worse morale killer than retrenchments. It is sacking a significant chunk of the workforce and announcing a pay rise for the CEO in the same week. But this obvious blunder keeps happening.

On 25 March, staff at a 3M plant in France were so angry about paltry severance packages for 110 of the plant's 253 workers, and the chairman George Buckley's 25 percent payrise to \$US12 million, that they held 3M executive Luc Roussele hostage for two days.

3M, known for its Post-It notes among other innovations, may have won dozens of employer of choice awards "for investing in our people" in the past, but tough times reveal the true values of the business. Clearly it is one thing to have happy, productive staff during boom times, it is another to be an employer of choice in tough economic times.

### **Lesson 6: Treat retrenched workers with the utmost respect**

It's a sign of the times that NEC Australia is funding "unhappy hour" farewell drinks in several departments over the coming weeks as 153 staff leave the company.

When companies don't treat retrenched staff well, there are long-term risks beyond

laziness and bogus sick days. The bad reputation lingers, long after the markets have recovered. "We will come out of this recession," says Wakefield. "And those that do it [retrenchment] well will be remembered."

Google has announced 200 redundancies in sales and marketing departments. Staff will be offered outplacement and severance packages, as well as the opportunity to apply for other jobs in the \$US109 billion company. The company is still hiring, looking at 360 staff positions (just not sales and marketing).

It is unlikely Google staff will take their managers hostage over the decision. Unlike the 3M CEO remuneration, company founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page have taken home annual salaries of \$1 since 2005 (their primary compensation is through their ownership stakes) with no stock options or bonuses.

### **Lesson 7: Don't forget the survivors of downsizing**

NEC Australia's general manager of HR and corporate response Peter Hoy says: "A lot of people aren't sleeping well at the moment. It is not an easy thing to do."

For the 822 NEC staff that have survived this round of job cuts, it is business as usual. Hoy concedes that staff are worried about the future. "They are asking us, are we viable?" Hoy hopes that NEC's new financial year on 1 April will have been a turning point after a tough year.

Wakefield emphasises to her clients the importance of individual performance management during and after corporate restructures. "You've got to engage with staff, ask plenty of questions, and keep walking the floors."

### **Lesson 8: Be consistent**

When a company sends inconsistent messages to staff (staff must use up annual leave but senior executives don't, travel budgets cut in some but not all departments),

employees switch off and reduce productivity and efficiency (unless you count surfing job sites and polishing up the CV as work).

Shen likens this situation to a virus. "The culture of the organisation becomes infectious," he says. "Staff become negative, unhelpful and poorly motivated."

### **Lesson 9: Don't be overly gloomy**

Chairman of Quest Serviced Apartments Paul Constantinou is determined to remain upbeat, despite the slowdown. "It's not a doom-and-gloom atmosphere. There are loads of opportunities out there," he says.

Constantinou has been in business for two decades, and has seen slumps before. "Quest customers may not be travelling as much as they used to, but they are still doing business," he says.

His franchise company operates 120 properties and has 55 employees. "A lot of people are reacting to the media and all the bad news." Constantinou advises Quest Apartment operators to listen less to the bad news and concentrate more on customers.

"Six months ago people were complaining about how they can't find good staff. So why, six months later, are they taking out the machete and cutting their employees?"

### **Lesson 10: When all else fails, there is always footy tipping**

One of the simplest, easiest and most popular morale booster in Australian workplaces is the humble footy tipping competition.

Food wholesaler Kirkfood only has a staff of 12, but there are more than 200 participants in its 2009 footy tipping competition. Clients have been encouraged to sign up (for \$40). Kirkfood manager Stephen Kirk can't believe how successful it has been.

"We actually use it as a bit of a tool to tell people about new products and services," he says. There is even a Kirkfood Facebook page where Kirkfood footy tippers can discuss the game kick by kick. "People get engaged in things they enjoy." Kirkfood has turned a bit of fun into an extremely valuable and painless way to regularly connect with customers without doing the hard sell.

### **Ingredients of morale-boosting bosses**

- Aware of their own limitations.
- Clear about outcomes and goals.
- Always looking for ways to improve productivity and performance.
- Able to deal with stress.
- Honest and ethical.
- Co-operative, supportive.
- Trust staff to contribute and perform.
- Have a vision for the future.

Source: Christopher Shen Consulting

\* \* \* \*

Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

Website: [www.christophershen.com.au](http://www.christophershen.com.au)