

Fight the Bunker Mentality

Five Cheap Ways to Inspire Agency Employees Despite Economic Stress

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During particularly stressful economic times, too many high-quality employees think it's smarter to step back than to step up. Keeping a low profile becomes a quiet refuge of the fortunately employed. Risk taking and visibility seem to be too high-risk until the economic furies have passed.

But letting this mind-set take hold in your agency invites a vicious cycle of decline. The economic slowdown offers an opportunity for employers to rethink their culture, while providing incentives to innovative employees to position the agency for rapid recovery and sustainable success.

Fighting the bunker mentality among your employees is an essential requirement of leadership. Organizations should -- quickly and, yes, cheaply -- consider these five cost-effective actions to boost energy, awareness and morale.

1. Relax the rules.

"No" is one of the smallest but most damaging words in the English language. And unfortunately, in this tough economic environment, companies are laying down more rules and seem to be saying no to a lot of things. Instead, look for ways to say yes. Relax the rules about how you let people use the internet. Remain flexible about hours. Allow more freedom where you can. This creates an environment where creativity can thrive.

2. Create a low-cost 'innovation lab.'

Encourage individuals and teams to create and test new ideas in a "lab" environment -- either by creating a physical space or through a cultural transition. You can take a look at other lab concepts within and outside the agency world to get ideas about how others do it. Think about what you see at places like MIT and Silicon Valley-type companies such as Google and Pixar. Then make sure you challenge the entire company to solve a pressing business issue or internal concern.

3. Interview new talent, and publicize their talent and skills.

Think about asking all your employees to conduct informational interviews to help find talent, building a pipeline for the future. Encourage these connections with the talent in the marketplace, some of whom may be without jobs. This gives everyone a chance to tell your story to the outside world, building buzz about the company or agency. Internally, it exposes the company to good people in the job market, providing benefits to everyone on both sides of the interview desk. Nothing makes you appreciate your job and company more than meeting people who want it.

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4. 'Day trip' the professional development.

Get out of the office! Take your employees outside and visit a venue that fosters creative thinking. Go to museums and galleries and see what's on the wall. Go to the supermarket and look at new products on the shelves. More important, look at the people -- your future customers, clients and prospects. Interact. This type of professional-development opportunity gives everyone a real-world perspective to solve creative challenges in an out-of-the-office context.

IBM, Fidelity, Sony, Gillette, Philips, Research In Motion (BlackBerry) and Kimberly-Clark.

5. Embrace social networking.

Get your employees involved in establishing the company's online community to optimize social-networking opportunities. They're doing it anyway, so why not enable them to benefit the company as well? You can also use social-networking concepts to solve internal challenges. For example, create an internal open-source site for every new-business pitch, and encourage employees to add ideas, build on them and vote for the best ones. Get the entire company jazzed about the pitch, and let everyone be a contributor.

There's never been a better time to show confidence in your people by helping them invest in themselves. Give everyone a shot of inspiration in the face of uncertainty, and give the organization itself a boost at the same time. Encourage new freedoms and do things a little differently. People remember managers and leaders who manage and lead and inspire instead of hiding and using the economy as an excuse. That sets the tone for the entire agency. When the economy starts to turn, you'll be well-positioned for growth.