

You Can't Afford to be an Average Manager in a Tough Economy

By **Jessika M. Ferm**

In a down economy, "average" simply won't cut it. Now, more than ever, managers are asked to do more with less and to produce super-human results. As if that wasn't difficult enough, most managers are losing valuable team members due to budget cuts or restructuring and are often left with a skeleton crew of overworked, underpaid, terrified employees.

So what is a manager to do? Sharpen your management skills and do so quickly! These powerful strategies will help you stay on top of your game.

1. Clarify Your Deliverables: If you haven't done so already, set up a strategic alignment meeting with your manager, and if possible, with his or her boss. Now is not the time to be shy about meeting and strategizing with your superiors. Without their crystal clear direction and guidance, you may find yourself taking your team in the wrong direction or misusing valuable resources. Get specific answers to questions like: "How is the company affected by the current economic environment?" "How are changes in the external markets impacting our bottom line?" "What priorities are most important in the next 90 days?" "What immediate changes do I need to make to get my team through the next 30 days?" Think strategically and position yourself and your team as key players with eyes on the bottom line.

2. Communicate Your Deliverables to Your Team: After receiving direction from your superiors, schedule a meeting with your team to share key points in a positive, honest manner. Avoid over-promising results or actions for which you are not in control. Instead, share strategies and actions that your team can complete and measure. Allow them to vent about their challenges and fears. Venting can take the edge off and allow your team to move forward constructively.

3. Delegate Responsibility, Accountability, and Authority: If you're not already a great delegator and suspect that you have some micro-management tendencies, begin sharpening your delegation skills immediately. You simply won't have

the luxury to micro-manage when you are asked to do more with less. Here are three tactics to get you started:

Take your to-do list and assign a code from 1-5 for each activity (1=must be done today, 2=must be done this week, 3=must be done this month, 4=must be done this quarter, 5=must be done within the year). Look at the spread of 1's and 2's. Are there too many immediate action steps on your to-do list? If so, what do you need to delegate to manage your time more effectively? Are you missing 3's, 4's, or 5's? If so, what long-term initiatives need to be included on your to-do list to ensure that you are thinking long-term?

Once you have numbered your activities, review the list and delegate tasks to your team members. Remember to select items that are best suited for someone's content knowledge as well as their driving interests. Doing so will inspire them to take personal accountability and to deliver quality results.

Set clear deadlines for each activity and give your team members the appropriate authority to complete each task. Ask for their commitment to meet each deadline and schedule check-in times for each activity to keep on track.

4. Turn Up Your "Leadership Dial": Now is a great time to turn up the volume on your leadership dial to make sure you are positively noticed. It is often said that "you manage systems and lead people." While it is important to have effective management systems (like a clear delegation plan or priority list), these strategies won't work if you don't have committed people using them.

During challenging economic times, your employees will look to you for leadership and they want to hear about success stories and strategies that work. They will also appreciate encouraging messages that keep them focused on positive outcomes. These three leadership techniques will help you engage the team:

Touch base with each of your team members as they get into work in the morning.

Ask them how they are doing and what they need from you today, this week or this month. Listen for specific challenges or opportunities and offer insight and advice.

Collect information about positive changes that affect your team (in the economy or within the company) and share articles, web resources, or other materials with your team to keep them energized.

Don't accept negative gossiping. During tough times, people tend to vent and can get stuck over-focusing on what isn't working. Encourage your team members to share events that have a positive focus and offer encouraging comments to those who keep a great attitude.

Tough economic times come and go. Great management and leadership skills last forever. Remember to take the time to continuously fine-tune, build, and develop your skills so that you are prepared to take on any challenge that comes your way.

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