



**The Upside of an Economic Downturn
Seize the Opportunity Employee Involvement Offers
by Scott Andersohn**

All the recent coverage of our country's economic downturn has people and businesses preparing for their lives to be turned upside down. Words like "deep recession" and comparisons to the Great Depression are fueling the flames of doom and gloom in businesses across this great nation of ours and creating fear and panic in the minds of employers and employees alike.

Employers make proclamations intended to soothe their panicked employees such as "We'll get through this," or "It will be a bumpy ride, but I'm confident in our team's ability to pull through." Their words are intended to offer comfort – they rarely do. Past experience has made employees a cynical bunch. The closed-door meetings that follow the proclamations tell the employees everything they need to know: they can forget all that "we'll pull through" stuff; it is a time for the business to hunker down and hope to ride out the storm.

Employees are hunkering down too. Protecting their turf. Hoarding suggestions for a time when they are less likely to cost someone their job. Innovate? Forget it! These are times for toeing the line. Stick your neck out now and your head might get chopped off. Cross-train? I don't think so! This is not a time to teach others to do your job – it is a time to demonstrate you are at least slightly better and every bit as loyal as everyone else.

It is ironic that at the very time a strong partnership between employee and employer could position a company to dominate its competition; they are hunkering down and avoiding each other. While the inclination of most employers is to communicate the minimum amount necessary, more information is what employees crave. This is a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bond between employee and employer yet too often our actions are more likely to weaken it. We scratch and claw to avoid the worst at a time we should be rallying the troops to bring out their best. There is opportunity right now to position a business for future growth while strengthening employee commitment and benefiting from their unique perspective. Past efforts in engaging employees will pay big dividends now in planning for the future.

Trying times like these also shine a bright light on the failings of past practices. It is difficult to bring out the best from your employees when historically you have rarely chosen to engage them. Employees' cynicism doesn't go away the moment you decide to throw open the conference room doors and invite them in. Prior experience makes employers skeptical about the value of involving employees more during these challenging times. Predictably, the voices of resistance will say things such as "We've tried that before; nobody had any good ideas. It was a waste of time." "It turned into a counterproductive gripe session."



Take action now while your competitors have their eyes to the sky waiting for it to fall. Invite your employees into the discussion about managing cash flow. Help them to understand the challenges the company is facing. Would a few more eyes focused on the bottom line really hurt? Ask for their suggestions instead of choosing to say nothing, leaving employees in a position to worry about the worst and hope for the best.

In his classic book, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” Dr. Stephen Covey tells us we should “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Be forthright with employees and ask the same of them. Put first things first – if the air needs to be cleared, have the courage to clear it. Listen to each other. Learn from each other. Challenge each other. Raise your expectations of each other. Grow together! Dare to move past the here and now. What opportunities lie ahead for your business? What actions could be taken now that will better position it for the future?

Employee involvement is not a cure-all. There may well be a business necessity to eliminate jobs. But what would happen if just this once you let employee interests be more important than the bottom line? Just long enough to hear them out, listening with a sincere desire to learn. Not demanding more from them, but rather more from yourself. Asking your employees what they want and need to be successful. The weather will be stormy for a while but the sky won't fall. Tap into your competitive advantage – your employees.

Then, open the conference room door permanently. Let the communication flow! It is commonly accepted that loyalty between employees and their employers is dead. It isn't dead; it has been abandoned. While other businesses are making plans to ride out the storm, opportunities abound for those courageous enough to sail directly into the wind. Employers willing to fully involve employees in the business stand to benefit from fresh ideas, strengthen employee satisfaction, create a more committed and loyal workforce, and position their business to ride its next great wave of success.

Scott Andersohn is Owner and Founder of Water's Edge Coaching. Water's Edge Coaching is committed to creating workplaces that are so fulfilling people are catapulted out of bed each day excited about the opportunity each day brings. In partnership with corporate and/or individual clients, we imagine possibilities, obliterate barriers and inspire greatness. You can learn more about it at www.watersedgecoaching.com.