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five

**critical responsibilities
of a leader in tough economic times**

By Aleta Norris

in good times, leadership is a critical responsibility. Leaders are responsible for mastering the daily balance of accountability for results and fostering the inspiration of the workforce. As if this isn't already a challenging enough task, add to it the dire elements of a record breaking downturn in the U.S. economy. Employees are mired in fear and discomfort and leaders are, too. It is in these most challenging times that effective leaders will show their talent and struggling leaders will show their ineffectiveness.

Many leaders show up every day, intending to do the best they can. Yet they often fall short of what organizations need and what employees want. Organizations are in dire need of leaders who can effectively balance the accountability for work being accomplished, with inspiring employees. With a focus on employee fulfillment, the following are five critical responsibilities of a leader during tough times.

Balance accountability and inspiration with an increased focus on inspiration.

"I want you all to get an A!" These were the enthusiastic first words I heard from my college calculus professor, Clayton Drouillard. He went on to say, "And we're all going to work hard to make that happen! I will do my part, and I expect you will do yours." He elaborated that day and stuck to this commitment. Furthermore, he opened every class with an energetic, good-natured banter. Then, it was time to get to work. Drouillard was the only professor who consistently met with students outside of his posted office hours. In the workplace, employees want to be held to a high standard of performance. They will respond to that expectation if it's articulated. Also, they will do even more if this is balanced by inspiration.

Provide intentional positive feedback and recognition.

If leaders are not intentional about giving positive feedback and recognition, it often doesn't happen. Most leaders intuitively believe their responsibility is to catch people doing something wrong. They've said to me, "That's why I got hired, to get people back on track." This is true, to some degree. The missed opportunity is in the power of positive feedback. What gets rewarded gets repeated. If someone tells you that you've done something good, are you inclined to repeat it? Recently, a manager shared with me that he had been receiving more positive feedback from his boss lately. He added, "The feedback from my boss makes me want to do even more." Too many leaders do not provide more positive feedback, because in the midst of everything on their plate, they don't think about it. This is understandable. So, be intentional! Schedule it. Do not allow yourself to go home at the end of the day until you've shared positive feedback with at least five people.

Support others as they deal with change.

This is a big one! Change has been a significant part of the business landscape during the past year. Employees have taken on more responsibility, changed who they report to, moved to new facilities due to shutdowns and been asked to take mandatory furloughs. Too often when employees are struggling with these



kinds of things, I hear leaders say, “Get over it, stop complaining. You’re lucky to have a job.” I don’t think this level of dismissiveness is intentional. Rather, it is for lack of actually thinking through the employees’ emotions. Leaders need to keep this in mind: All of these things represent a loss. Loss makes people sad or afraid or angry. It also contributes to loss of identity or confusion. These responses are predictable. Leaders need to step up proactively and ask employees how they are doing and find out what they need to be able to move forward.

Ask and listen.

On a day-in and day-out basis, leaders tend to talk at people! After all, leaders know more, right? And they also have the power to speak over their people, if they choose to use it. Employees want to be valued. They want their thoughts, opinions, needs and expectations to be valued. The only way these things can be valued is if they are known. So, leaders need to ask.

Especially during tough times, leaders need to touch base with each of his or her employees monthly and ask three key questions: What has been going well for you during the past month? What has not been going as well as you would like? What else will be helpful for me to know? I encourage you to get their full list! Too often, leaders grab hold of the first thing that is said and move forward to solve it. This same exercise can be conducted at a team level. For the team, you may want to add more questions:

What are our key priorities at this time? What do we need from our leader to be successful? What do we need from other areas of the organization to be successful?

Over-communicate a number of things.

Leaders operate at a different level than employees. They know more about the ins and outs of the situation than employees do. They spend hours discussing the current issues, key threats, future possibilities and what to do about them. Meanwhile, employees (who are living in their own place of fear and uncertainty) are waiting with bated breath for answers and explanations of some kind. If leaders really understood the discomfort, they would be much more diligent about creating opportunities for sharing this information. Be intentional about your communication strategies. Employees deserve this, especially now.



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Aleta Norris, founder of Impact Consulting Group, LLC and Living As A Leader, both located in Brookfield, will facilitate several upcoming WICPA Fall Focus meetings. Visit www.wicpa.org for details.

