

Team Building in a Poor Economy: Five Leadership Strategies

Lately we have been bombarded with news regarding the national debt, poor earnings reports, bankruptcy filings, and layoffs. Most organizations' knee-jerk reaction – partly to appear more fiscally responsible to shareholders– is to eliminate “unnecessary” professional development activities from the budget. One common casualty is team-building.

In more prosperous times, when an organization identifies a team with less than stellar performance, it was easy to address the issue by hiring additional staff or purchasing new technology. Even though this may have only addressed a “symptom” rather than a core problem, it was a stop-gap measure that allowed the organization to keep moving forward at an acceptable pace.

Ironically, it is during a downturn when team building is most needed. On many high-performing teams, team members split their focus between the task at hand and improving relationships amongst other team members. In the current climate, organizations are cutting back on staff, new-hires, and external resources, forcing each individual contributor to shoulder more. When this occurs, the natural tendency at the micro-level is for organizational members to focus inward, ignore the needs of team members, lose sight of how their activities contribute to the larger goals and, in extreme cases, engage in the blame-game when the team falls short.

When this occurs across an organization, results can be devastating. It is important for executives to adopt a macro-level view of teambuilding, and the current economic downturn presents an extraordinary opportunity for leaders to unite both the members of teams as well as the teams that collectively make the organization. To follow are five strategies that leaders can utilize to assist their organizations weather the storm and emerge from the economic crisis stronger and more focused.

1. **Commit to Organizational Members:** No organizational member is going to commit to the team unless they feel this commitment has been reciprocated. It is important for leaders to explicitly communicate their commitment to organizational members, to express that their contribution is not only valued, but necessary for long term success. It is important to communicate this message repeatedly. It is equally important that leaders do not communicate this message to those who aren't in the organization's long term plans – as other organizational members will believe that the assurances they have received are simply empty words.
2. **Leverage the Crisis:** Can the crisis be connected to the organizational vision and mission? How will adhering to the vision help ensure the organization's survival? Leaders need to emphasize that the only way to make it through the downturn is together, with every member contributing to the best of their ability. If there is a

tangible vision, and leaders demonstrate how uniting during the crisis will help realize that vision, members' commitment to both the organization and their tasks will be strengthened.

3. **Empower All Members:** Crises tend to level the playing field. For example, a tidal wave does not discriminate between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. The flip side of this is that organizational members who may have once felt powerless now feel more comfortable expressing their voice. This can be further encouraged if leaders actively solicit ideas from all levels of the organization, from those on the cleaning staff to senior executives. Leaders are often amazed at the many common-sense ideas that, when nurtured, can be easily implemented to streamline processes and save a significant amount of money.
4. **Flatten the Organization:** Especially in bureaucratic cultures, communication is typically unidirectional, flowing down within each division or unit. Additionally, those who thrive in a bureaucracy are usually concerned with acquiring or maintaining power. Leaders can work to convince organizational members that adhering to the behaviors of the past will not only be unproductive, but may also lead to organizational irrelevance. The economic crisis is an opportunity to erect bridges across silos, and solicit information from the ground floor of the organization. In doing this, important information (which was once "power") begins to flow up silos, and across divisions more freely.
5. **Model the behavior you seek:** Each of the ideas above requires that the leader models the desired behavior. For example, if you want to empower those on the ground floor, it is first necessary to empower executives. Additionally, a leader can speak with those on the ground floor on a regular basis, actively soliciting their opinion about how operations can be run more efficiently. A simple question, "how can we do what you're doing better?" will go a long way. If you want increased information flow across the organization, ensure that the executive team communicates freely with one another, and that they, in turn, take time to connect on a personal level with their staff. Use any undesired behaviors as learning opportunities for the rest of the organization, and publicize examples of the desired behaviors as success stories.

Many high profile organizations (e.g., Ford, IBM) have weathered multiple recessions and emerged stronger and more efficient. Leaders play a critical role in how organizational members react to the crisis and behave throughout the process. In taking a macro-view of team building, leaders can reframe negative economic forces into an opportunity for the organization to unite and evolve into a more relevant entity.