

Fighting Back the FEAR

Six ways to hold on to your employees during a recession

When employees live in fear for their jobs, your firm suffers. Stressed people can't think clearly, and their negative feelings can affect other staff members. Your service quality can drop, and you risk losing clients.

And yet, according to Donna Gaines, many people during this recession do live in such fear, and with reason. Gaines is president of Gaines International, a specialized professional search firm for the design and building industries (www.gainesintl.com). She says employees throughout the industry are afraid of losing their jobs and of being unable to find another. "We are receiving many more calls from active job seekers than we did one year ago," Gaines says. "Even top performers are at risk."

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If your firm is at risk, how can you mitigate your employees' fear, build their confidence, and keep them with you? According to Gaines, if you want your employees to stay loyal, you must do the same for them. Let them know you are on their side. She suggests six tactics:

1. Let your employees know what is really going on.

Gather your people together and tell them where your firm really stands. Keep nothing in the dark. "Bring them into a conference room and tell them the issues," Gaines says. "Not knowing is intimidating. Your employees will manifest in their minds the worst case scenarios that may not be true." Let your staff know your financial situation—your

receivables and your "monthly nut," Gaines says. "Tell them, 'Here's where we were a year ago, and here's where we are now.' Knowing the real problem will let them pull together faster."

2. Have your staff locate new revenue-producing markets.

Look into starting a graphic arts division or moving into facilities management. Investigate the area of homeland security. Think about doing CAD work or website design for other A/E/C firms. Find new avenues, fresh endeavors. This will not only rekindle excitement and motivation, but increase your cash flow. As an example, Gaines cites Gilfillan/Callahan Architects, Inc. (www.gcarch.com), a small Illinois design firm that has launched a separate IT network and website design branch called Flying Arch (www.flyingarch.com). (See this month's page 3 article.)

3. Cross-train through job sharing.

Help your people build their skills so they can be more marketable. They will really know you stand behind them—that you care about *them* and not just their position. "Let them know you care about their career in a profession they worked hard to get into," says Gaines. So if one person does just schematics and another does CDs, set them up to learn each other's jobs, she suggests. "Make it a collaborative effort; it will create great camaraderie."

4. Offer in-house training and coaching.

By bringing in HR consultants, you can help your staff work through stressful periods. Team

building, conflict resolution, stress management, employee orientation, sensitivity skills—all of these can help your staff know you care and strengthen their loyalty. Among others, Gaines recommends ADP TotalSource as a provider of these employee benefits (www.adptotal-source.com).

5. Stop spending.

Again, meet with your staff and brainstorm how to tighten your belt so you can keep everyone working. "Get your accounting people in there, too," Gaines says. "Tell everyone you are spending too much money and must cut costs. Ask what they can suggest." Being on the frontlines, employees are often in the best position to find solutions. Keep your staff in the loop; make them part of the process. "Get them to buy into the problem instead of making them the enemy," says Gaines.

6. Encourage personal care.

Get your people taking care of themselves, both emotionally and physically. Allow a few "free" hours each week for them to do personal things—whether it's spending time with their kids, visiting a museum, or even just shopping. Close early on Friday. It'll be a tradeoff: although you won't pay them for the free time, the time itself is the payoff.

Encourage physical fitness at your firm. Look into getting a health club discount for your staff. Gaines notes that some insurance companies give consideration on premiums for firms with such plans. "If you feel better physically during a stressful period," she says, "you'll do a better job." ■