
A recession antidote is people-enhancement

By James F. Bracher

BOMBARDED by bad news, disturbed by threats of terrorism, confounded by an economy that has skidded into recession and angered by elected officials who posture and pontificate rather than step up to the hard questions of deficits, ethics and accountability — people are upset. These people are the nation's employees — whether on the production floor or in the boardroom. And when employees are upset, so is business, and so am I.

People have good reason to be upset when the problems seem to emanate from nearly everywhere: problems arising from war jitters, from drought jitters, from the savings and loan debacle and other financial jitters, from anxiety in general.

Are we Americans simply too sensational? Anything less than extremes seems unworthy of the news, the public's attention or the government's concern. Unless it's the worst hurricane of the decade, the most serious drought of the century, the vilest serial murder, the biggest financial disaster, the most massive air bombardment or the longest-winning streak in NFL history — we seem uninterested.

Listen daily to the "commercial heartbeat" of some of America's most dynamic, growth-oriented businesses.

I'm hearing this: America needs to focus today on "people enhancement" so we might ensure a better, more productive nation tomorrow. If this is the truism it seems to be, then why is it so difficult for anyone to take action?

There is no cure-all, but business leaders are telling me these are working:

✓ Do your organizational spring cleaning now. The recession has broken the routine; use it as an opportunity to stop and reflect. If business is slow, view it as an opportunity to re-evaluate your business' attitudes toward your employees and your customers. Is your organization set up in the best way to serve both well? Survey and assess your management's personality and leadership styles:

The results will allow your leaders to enhance effectiveness by learning ways to accommodate and complement diverse styles when the economy rebounds.

✓ Resolve to communicate better with your employees. Start holding more regular meetings. Find out what is on your employees' minds. You can't reduce the uncertainty, but you can reduce the tension. Place greater emphasis on an optimistic future. Devise and implement new people strategies that will improve understanding and interaction among diverse team members. Employees who have been laid off are already among the ranks of the unemployed; the people you need to worry about are the employees who remain but are growing more anxious. Move now to reassure them and help improve production. Is there anything



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wrong when levels of anxiety plummet and productivity soars? Obviously nothing.

✓ Resolve to communicate better with your customers. Reach out. Encourage your employees to reach out, too. Take the time to renew common bonds with the customers and clients who have made your business an economic reality. Such opportunities take many forms: professional organizations, service groups, sporting events, a follow-up letter or simply a telephone call. Make that extra effort to keep the channels of communication open by returning all phone calls sooner rather than later. Go ahead and contact your customers, even if it is only to commiserate with them: "I'm all right. How about you?"

✓ Acknowledge openly that now may not be the time to travel and that travel savings realized today could evolve into permanent cost-saving measures. The threat of terrorism can be as devastating as terrorism's actual attacks. For those in business who must fly, anxiety levels are reaching all-time highs. Acknowledge those concerns. The gulf war gave video-conferencing a jump-start. Electronic communications have an added benefit: They make us communicate more crisply and succinctly.

✓ Seek "balance." These are not the times to be, or to encourage those who tend to be, sensational. Do your part to offset the overload of bad news fed to us by the media morning, noon and night. If children, employees and people in general are more productive and creative when reminded of what they are doing well, then why shouldn't we practice some of this same positive reinforcement? We all want and need to know what is going wrong, but we also benefit from reports about what is going right. Bad news feeds on itself. If allowed to run unchecked, it darkens the attitudes of your employees and your business' future.

Recession breeds frustration, and frustration retards progress. Frustration diverts our attention to failures and away from Successes. People become upset. Even so, recession can help us rechannel our energies to surmount whatever wall or restraint we encounter. It can teach a person a new way over the wall, a way that may entail finding an "Invisible" door rather than embarking on a conventional climb. Smart leaders know the whereabouts of such doors, and "people enhancement" is one of them. If we enhance individuals, we can revitalize business and society.

James F. Bracher is chairman of Dimension Five Consultants, a Monterey-based leadership enhancement and management consulting firm founded in 1980 with clients across the United States, Europe and Asia.

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