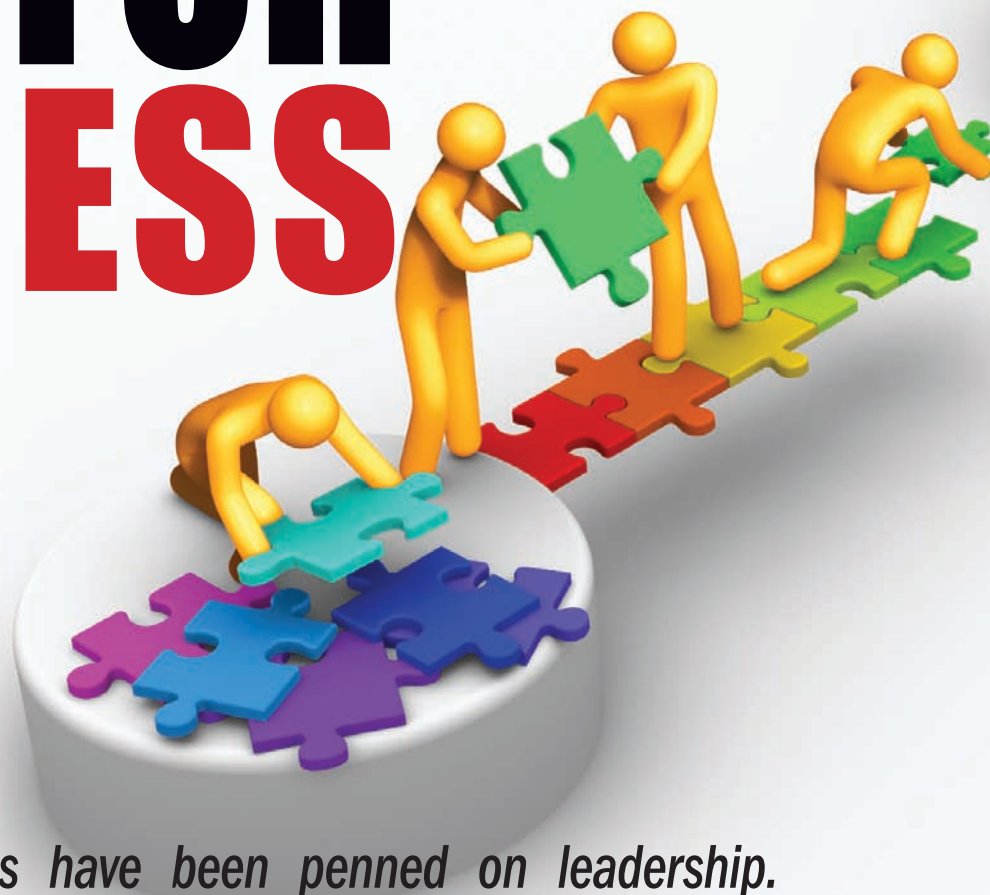


LEAD FOR SUCCESS

BY JULIE AHO



Countless volumes have been penned on leadership. But at its essence, good leadership could be summarized like this: Think of a string – push it and it goes nowhere. Pull – and it follows you quite readily.

How well businesses navigate workforce dynamics in a stormy economy, say Northland business, personnel and educational professionals, depends on good organizational leadership – and engaging employees to meet economic challenges.

Fight the Twin Organizational Parasites

In a recession, employee fear and uncertainty are twin organizational parasites that are bad for the bottom line, said Ken Buck, founder and principal of Ken Buck Consulting, LLC. Productivity and morale, naturally, deteriorate when workers fear losing their jobs and don't have a clear view

of their employer's business strategy. So good leaders know that in times of turmoil, the employee grapevine is really humming. Sometimes it conveys accurate information. But often, ill-founded rumors are the norm – especially when companies don't craft employee communication plans with the same care they devote to their business strategies.

Clear communication is the best weapon to address fear and uncertainty – and keep employees focused on doing their jobs well. "Flexibility is the watchword for leadership and employees," said Buck. "Management should be communicating

upfront, whether it's to say, 'We do not anticipate having to cut jobs,' or 'We could eliminate jobs or reduce hours to keep everyone working.' Be brutally honest, but remember that being brutally honest does not mean handling these tough issues with no tact or compassion."

It's crucial to address rumors squarely. "At one company I worked with, we established a rumor board for employees to write questions on," Buck said. "And we answered their questions within a week. There are real benefits to doing that, because employees spend less time worrying and conjecturing when they have the facts."

If job cuts are necessary, Buck noted it's imperative to ensure all levels of management are clearly informed of the rationale before reductions are announced to employees. "Executives sometimes make the mistake of not talking enough with mid-management people, so they don't have the knowledge and perspective they need to provide appropriate responses to their staff's questions," he said. "It's very important to talk to their management to say, 'Here's what it looks like, here's where we're headed and here's what we'll do,' and then open it up for discussion and ask them whether they're comfortable with the plan."

Also, "The fewer instances of reductions you have, the better," Buck said. "The survivors are relieved, but suspicious of tomorrow. And nobody will believe the worst is over if you keep announcing more cuts. Companies can't continually tell workers 'We need you to work as hard as you can' when your actions clearly tell them 'You are disposable.' Companies want loyal employees – but loyalty goes both ways."

Treating employees fairly and consistently in good times and bad, and communicating clearly, is how a company builds and maintains a good reputation with employees and customers. "You want to keep your reputation in the public eye as being a good company and an employer of choice, because that's how you will consistently attract the best employees," Buck said. "If you don't, it hurts you long-term when the economy recovers."

The key to weathering tough times, he emphasized, is keeping employees focused on their jobs. This also means soliciting their ideas on how to reduce waste, cut



Ken Buck
Ken Buck Consulting, LLC



Keith Isaacs
Express Employment Professionals

"AT ONE COMPANY I WORKED WITH, WE ESTABLISHED A RUMOR BOARD FOR EMPLOYEES TO WRITE QUESTIONS ON." – KEN BUCK

"A DOWNTURN CAN ACTUALLY SPUR BUSINESS CREATIVITY AND POSITION BUSINESSES FOR THE FUTURE, WHEN THE ECONOMY STARTS TO BOUNCE BACK." – KEITH ISAACS



Jen Bertsch
Moxy Coaching



David Lutzka
Duluth Business University



Rebecca Ellenson
SOAR Career Solutions

costs and run your business more efficiently. "They're the ones who know their jobs," Buck said, "so why not ask them?"

Tap the Mother of Invention

Business Development Manager Keith Isaacs of Express Employment Professionals agrees that necessity is the mother of invention.

"Workers can help employers be more cost-effective," he said. "Ask them, 'What can you do in your position to help your company save money and improve the bottom line?' I think there's a lot of value to business owners in doing this – and it's a positive, effective, creative approach to improving business prospects. So have that conversation with employees; it's a great place to start."

Now is also the time to identify new ways to market and advertise your business and find new customers – to diversify outside of core operations, Isaacs said: "A downturn can actually spur business creativity and position businesses for the future, when the economy starts to bounce back."

In conversations Express Employment Professionals is having with clients that cut jobs, "they're finding out some things still must get done," Isaacs noted. "So they're looking at project-based work, which frees up time to focus on long-term plans. This can be of value to organizations – as well as use of contracted services – because it helps them be flexible, nimble and creative to meet business needs."

Isaacs also believes in being positive and proactive, which keeps workers focused on long-term success. For employees who love the Northland, there is strong incentive to help their employers remain successful.

"Constantly dwelling on the negative really gets people down," he observed. "This region is a great place to live and raise kids and there's also great potential here. As companies, we have to do things differently – but we'll do what we need to and position ourselves for the future. I think the downturn, eventually, will be a blip on the radar screen for this region."

Build Better Teamwork and Marketability

Jen Bertsch, a business and personal coach who founded Moxy Coaching, said employers often experience a sense of "heavy lifting" that eases after workers are laid off.

"And then comes the new day for those left," Bertsch said. "This transition is significant for organizations and takes time for staff to process. Employers must recognize this, and ensure employees are given feedback on their performance and trained when assuming new responsibilities. Clear and frequent communication is important to organizational success after a company downsizes. If too many questions are left unanswered, employee engagement diminishes."

Employers must also ensure workers understand their roles in the business strategy. "It's important for employees to feel engaged, so they act in ways that achieve key outcomes," Bertsch explained. "They feel engaged if they believe their manager knows them, they know what they're accountable for and they're satisfied with their place of work." To that end, it's helpful for people at all organizational levels to gain feedback from supervisors and peers about performance. "I see a lot of businesses doing this by conducting 360-degree evaluations," she noted.

Improving skills or achieving an advanced degree helps people improve their marketability (and employers' competitiveness) in good or difficult times – and channels the negative energy of fear and uncertainty into positive action.

"I see people become complacent, putting aside their true desires. And paying for schooling that isn't aligned with their passion isn't a good career plan," Bertsch said. "People are much more likely to be successful when they're doing something they really love to do."

David Lutzka, director of Information Technology & Distance Education Operations for Duluth Business University, agrees. "We're seeing increasing enrollment," he said. "And we're also getting older students entering a new career field. Most have previous education, but typically not a degree. Their goal is to pick a career. Students ask lots of questions, including placement rates in their field. We have requirements for job shadowing and we try to paint a real-world experience for students on what they'll actually experience in the career they've chosen."

Students – both young and older – can be uncertain of whether their skills and aptitudes dovetail with career objectives. So they value the consultation and assessment DBU staff provide, as well as the university's educational approach, which is to provide programs based on regional business needs.

"In programs for which we have internships, many employers told us, 'We created jobs for our interns because we didn't want to lose them,'" Lutzka said.

Lutzka noted that improving skills and exploring educational avenues is almost always seen as a positive step by most people. "It's uplifting and motivating; you have a goal and feel rewarded at the end of each quarter". And online training options, he said, are a great fit for working adults, since they fit more easily into schedules.

He also stressed the importance of networking to connect students with employers. "Many students have great skills and education, but lack networking skills," Lutzka said. "We're a local university and do a lot of training for business needs here in this region. Networking with and knowing people in the region's industries is the best way to be aware of career opportunities."

Visualize Transformations

SOAR Career Solutions Director Rebecca Ellenson said that since many jobs are not advertised in newspapers or on Web sites, good, old-fashioned "pounding the pavement" increases the likelihood of success. "About 80 percent of job opportunities are found through networking," she said, "with family, friends, clubs, at church or even when you run into business contacts at a grocery store. It's getting out there to say, 'I'm looking for a job; here are my skills; please keep me in mind.' Anyone, really, can create a business card and carry it around to be ready for networking opportunities."

Ellenson said people often don't realize how transferrable their skills are. "It's a matter of thinking about yourself differently," she explained. "If you have customer service, administrative, data entry or supervisory skills, for example, you could work for a wide variety of businesses. It's important to practice your spiel, so you're prepared to market yourself at any opportunity – and that's hard for some people to do."

SOAR teaches people networking and interview skills. "We can do mock interviews on video," Ellenson said. "And we see a transformation in people when they stay positive and visualize success. Employers seek people who are motivated and have positive attitudes – attributes that are important to both retaining a job and seeking a new position or career."

Many people in the region probably aren't aware that SOAR not only helps

unemployed and underemployed individuals find jobs; it also offers career consultation and advice for anyone who wants it, for a very modest fee.

"We serve a wide range of clients," Ellenson said. "Some have master's degrees, some have a GED. What we do is offer hope by teaching comprehensive employment skills and how to create a plan to get a job. We help clients identify their strengths and barriers, motivation, work history and provide a career assessment to identify the kinds of work they like and will therefore be

most successful in."

In a stormy economy, Ellenson noted, it's important to not "globalize" the recession. "Focus on what your business is, what your job is or on what job you want to have," she said. "This is a time for creativity and innovative solutions. I love my job, because I see transformations every day." **D**

Julie Aho is editor of the Duluthian.



And he's got our number.

At KSG, you're not just a person, you're a number. But we love numbers. And we're sure you do, too. So here are some of our favorites: 727-8030. Because when you want to get hold of us, you want to get hold of us now.



kolquist, seitz & goldman, Ltd.
Certified Public Accountants and Consultants

The Power of Planning.

Over 35 years of expertise in accounting, tax services, financial planning and management consulting. www.ksgcpa.com • 218-727-8030