

Leadership – Developing “Soft Skills” to deal with uncertainty

Introduction: Current economic outlook

The 2008 / 2009 world economic downturn has been unprecedented.

In Australia unemployment rates are steady, but underemployment [working less hours] and the casualisation of the workforce are increasing.

The National Australia Bank's August 2009 monthly business survey notes that:

“The rise in manufacturing and construction may not be sufficient in the second half of the year to offset the falls in retail...” and that *“business investment's still very low”*.

“The NAB has raised its Australian growth forecasts to 0 per cent for 2009 and 1.25 per cent for 2010, which fall somewhere roughly between the most recent International Monetary Fund and Reserve Bank predictions.”

The workplace impact of the current economic outlook

What are the emotional effects on people in workplaces that have been directly affected by the economic downturn, or fear the “knock-on” effects to their industry and jobs; combined with a slow economic recovery?

Workplaces that have been affected may have lost staff and those remaining may have changed roles, fewer people, reduced budgets and reduced inventory as business's cut exposure and debt.

The direct impact of the economic downturn to affected workplaces may be uncertainty of market conditions, changed responsibilities for both managers and staff, and general unease and lack of confidence reinforced by constant media speculation about the future and recent bad economic news.

Diagnosing possible impacts in your workplace from the current economic outlook

How to tell if your people are falling into the uncertainty trap caused by the economic downturn?

- General unease, fear, or lack of confidence may result in a variety of observed behaviours.
- Mature people who are nearing retirement age may be fearful that they have insufficient resources.

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- We may observe that people are less open, less communicative, less trusting, more cautious, may misinterpret directions and communication more easily, and, may require more reassurance and support.
- We may also observe loss of productivity and increases in unplanned leave.

Using “soft skills” to help others impacted by the current economic outlook

What to do to support others and remain successful in uncertain and difficult times?

Zenworkz recommends:

- **Listen**
- **Acknowledge**
- **Communicate**
- **Coach**

Zenworkz suggests that the first thing we do to support others is ensure we are effectively listening.

The “soft skills” of listening and acknowledgement are good business practice

- Listening effectively is to reach a clarity of understanding
- Understanding clearly is to respond appropriately and acknowledge feelings
- Responding appropriately is to enhance communication
- Enhancing communication is to support cooperation and reduce uncertainty
- Supporting cooperation is to improve morale and reduce stress
- Improving morale is to increase job commitment
(or commitment to the job)
- Increasing job commitment is to focus on productivity and results

When we have effectively listened and acknowledged others concerns and uncertainties, then and only then Communicate, Communicate, Communicate and Coach to restore well being and productivity.

Zenworkz recommends that we communicate and coach to ensure:

- Clarity on what the business future holds for growth and the skills which will be needed
- A clear sense of purpose for each individual, group and team focused on overall business solutions and needs
- Explicit, relevant and timely communication between individuals, group and team members particularly about changes which may impact individuals and give rise to general uncertainty
- Clarity about allocated roles & responsibilities
- Supportive and appropriate behaviours
- Regular communication to stakeholders
- A focus on and achievement of results
- Update and reports on progress and business success

Summary: Leadership – Developing “Soft Skills” to deal with uncertainty

Managers and Team Leaders have a critical role in ensuring the well being and productivity of their workplace in times of uncertain economic outlook.

Zenworkz recognises the most effective observation, communication and coaching [the so called “soft skills”] is done within your business by trusted managers and team leaders.

Zenworkz can help support your business by enhancing individual communication strategies and skills, or assisting group facilitation.

Use of a Zenworkz facilitator can create a different and safe environment to discuss and resolve situations or issues which create uncertainty.

Zenworkz can also work with you to provide standard and tailored surveys so that your business can “take the pulse” of your workforce at regular intervals to determine engagement, issues, and development opportunities.

To ensure that your people and business are in the best possible shape for growth now – talk to Zenworkz.

Contact Zenworkz: contact@zenworkz.com or call 02 6686 8413