

A helping hand

In an economic downturn, it's all the more important to ensure that your employees feel fulfilled in every area of their lives. Guest contributor Stewart D Friedman, Practice Professor of Management at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, explains why

As a manager, the knee-jerk response in an economic downturn is to wring greater productivity out of your workforce by making your employees work harder. But this can hurt more than it helps, fuelling resentment and burnout.

A smarter approach is to be open with your employees about the business problems you face and invite them to be part of the solution, while encouraging them to meet critical needs in other parts of their lives. Do this right and you'll reduce stress, decrease wasted time, boost trust, build resilience and improve productivity.

THE MANAGER'S CHALLENGE

As the manager of an employee, you might take one of these three approaches when times are tough:

1) "Sarah, we're having a bad year, so if you want any kind of bonus you're going to have to work harder than ever before. Sorry – I know it's tough, but that's just the reality."

2) "Sarah, I know there's a lot of pressure on you now – on all of us, really. I want to make sure you're getting all your work done. Let me know how I can help."

3) "Sarah, I know there's a lot of pressure on you now – on all of us, really. I want to make sure you're taking care of

all the things that are important to you – not only at work, but in other areas of your life, too – so that you don't burn out. What small changes could you try that would make things easier and give you more energy to focus on performing well for our business? We desperately need you to be at your best!"

The first option helps Sarah to face the harsh reality and attaches economic incentives to her performance. But you haven't dealt with whatever other stress factors Sarah is facing or explored what's really driving her. That means the risk of burnout is high, and the energy she might bring from her most powerful sources of motivation remains unused.

The second option shows your empathy and desire to be supportive, but it's so passive and vague that she probably won't even be convinced that you're serious about providing real support – much less be inclined to change her behaviour.

The third option has the greatest chance of producing the results you want, because the more attention you pay to employees' lives beyond work, the more you'll get out of them at work – especially during times of great stress. If you acknowledge the pressure Sarah is under and show that you think about her as a whole person, you're likely to be rewarded with loyalty and increased effort.

SUPPORTING THE WHOLE PERSON

The idea of encouraging productivity by supporting the whole person is what I call 'Total Leadership'. It's based on a rejection of the idea that the more you strive to do well in one dimension of your life (eg your work), the more the other dimensions (your self, your home and your community) will suffer.

If you make trade-offs among the different dimensions of your life, you may well feel:

- 🌀 unfulfilled because you're not doing what you love
- 🌀 inauthentic because you're not acting according to your values
- 🌀 disconnected from people who matter to you
- 🌀 exhausted from trying to keep up with it all.

The process outlined below addresses these issues. It is centred on smart experiments designed to benefit your work, home, community and self, all at once – four-way wins. When people undertake these experiments, they shift some of the attention they have disproportionately allotted to work and dedicate it to the other domains. The result is surprising: their satisfaction in all the domains, including work, goes up – and so does their performance.

The process includes these steps:

REFLECT ON YOUR LIFE

For each of the four key areas – work, home, community and self – spend time thinking about how important each is to you, how much time and energy you devote to each, and how satisfied you are in each. Are there discrepancies between what is important to you and how you spend your time and energy? What is your overall level of satisfaction with your life?

This shouldn't be a solitary process. Start by talking to peer coaches – trusted colleagues and friends – to identify your core values, your leadership vision and the current alignment of your actions and values. Throughout the process, this outside perspective will provide a valuable sounding board for your ideas, challenge you, throw up fresh possibilities for innovation – and help to hold you accountable to your commitments.

Then identify the key stakeholders in the four domains of your life and talk to them about what you might change. The chances are that you'll be surprised by how much your preconceptions of what they need from you differ from the reality. That's partly why this stage is so important; the best experiments are all about making changes that your stakeholders wish for as much as you do, if not more so.

BRAINSTORM POSSIBILITIES

Next, based on the insight you've gained from these reflections and discussions, make a list of small experiments that may help you to move closer to greater satisfaction in all four domains. These are new ways of doing things that would carry minimal risk and enable you to see rapid results. For example:

- 🌀 turning off your mobile when you're at home with your family could help you to sharpen your focus on the people who matter most to you, such as your partner or children

- 🌀 exercising several times a week could give you more energy for work and improve your self-esteem and health, making you a better parent and friend
- 🌀 joining a club with work colleagues could help you to forge closer friendships with them
- 🌀 preparing for the week ahead on Sunday evenings could help you to sleep better and go into the new week feeling refreshed

CHOOSE YOUR EXPERIMENTS

Now narrow down the list of experiments to three of the most promising. These should:

- 🌀 improve your satisfaction and performance in all four areas of your life
- 🌀 have effects that the people who matter to you in every area of your life will view as positive
- 🌀 be the most costly – in terms of regret and missed opportunities – if you don't do them
- 🌀 position you to practise the skills you most want to develop and do more of what you want to be doing.

MEASURE YOUR PROGRESS

Finally, decide how you're going to measure your progress and make a list of the steps you need to take to put the experiments into action. The metrics you choose could be all kinds of things: cost savings from travelling less; degree of satisfaction with time spent with your family; hours spent volunteering, and so on. They can be objective or subjective, qualitative or quantitative, reported by you or by others, and frequently or intermittently observed.

SMALL WINS ADD UP

This process doesn't involve taking huge risks. It works because it entails realistic expectations, short-term changes you control, and the explicit support of those around you.

It isn't practical to try out more than three experiments at once. Typically, two will turn out to be relatively successful and one simply won't work. If an experiment doesn't work out, you can stop or adjust it, and it will have cost you very little.

If it does work out, it's a small win; over time, these add up so that your overall efforts are focused increasingly on those things that matter most to you. Either way, you will learn more about how to lead in all parts of your life, without biting off more than you can chew.

So try it out for yourself and encourage your employees to do likewise. It may seem counterintuitive, especially in an economic downturn, to suggest to your staff that they devote more time and effort to their lives outside work. But if they are happier and more fulfilled, they will also be more productive. ■

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