

12 tips to help employees handle the stress of tough times

Layoffs, pay cuts and an uncertain economy have left many organizations with fewer employees to do the work—often for the same or less money. Not all of those employees are handling it well.

A Robert Half International survey reveals that nearly half of U.S. workers feel stressed out, compared with 39% in other countries. They say they're sad, worried, distracted, burned out and low on morale.

Those kinds of feelings lead to lower productivity, often because of “presenteeism” by employees who show up but don't feel well enough to work. In fact, says the Integrated Benefits Institute, nearly two-thirds of depression-related productivity losses are due to presenteeism. (See [“Measure productivity loss when tallying up health costs”](#) to learn more about the associated costs.)

Here are a dozen ways to deal with economy-induced employee stress and help your employees focus on their work:

1. Watch your words. Don't ignore symptoms of depression, anxiety, illness or drug and alcohol abuse that affect an employee's performance. Do approach the subject carefully. A manager can offer help for problems that occur at work, but may not broach issues that occur away from the business.

Best bet: Acknowledge that the employee seems to be struggling, and remind him or her that the company offers a confidential employee assistance program (EAP).

2. Update your message. Regularly publicize the EAP to all employees—and update your message so it's relevant during these economic hard times. EAP counselors can help managers tasked with the stressful job of laying off employees, for example, or workers who are losing their homes to foreclosure.

3. Check your priorities. If your team is leaner than before, everyone is working harder with fewer resources. Eventually, that will diminish your organization's effectiveness. Rebalance assignments to prevent overwork and focus team members on the most critical projects. Postpone tasks that aren't top priority until you're able to bring in more help.

4. Nip depression early. Ask your disability benefits carrier to determine how many claims involve a diagnosis of depression. It's probably more than you think. Employees who take disability leave because of depression have 44% more lost time than those who take it for other reasons, according to the Integrated Benefits Institute.

Advice: Once you have the numbers, increase early depression screening for disability sufferers—and pump up your communication about your EAP so all employees will know how to get help for depression.

5. Monitor the rumor mill. Forty-two percent of workers say they are afraid of layoffs, a CareerBuilder survey reveals. Often, those fears are based on gossip and speculation rather than actual plans for downsizing—yet the

perception is what causes employees to worry and work less productively.

The key: Address rumors as soon as they surface.

6. Allow telework. Employees who take over the work of laid-off colleagues often put in more hours than before. Allowing them to work from home a couple of days a week eliminates the commute and can shorten the workday by an hour or two.

7. Offer financial advice. An employee with an unemployed spouse or who has accepted a pay cut could be struggling to make ends meet. He or she is bringing that burden to work: One-third of employees surveyed by the Personal Finance Employee Education Foundation reported that money woes have made them so upset they could not perform well at work. Plus financially unhealthy employees are more likely to smoke, eat unhealthy food, be overweight and skip exercise.

Employer-sponsored access to financial counselors and education can help them get their finances under control and their minds back on the job.

8. Pat employees on the back. With raises and bonuses scarce these days, employees who use monetary rewards to gauge their value to the company have lost their touchstone. Remind employees frequently that they are valued despite your organization's cost cutting.

Reward good work with small gifts, public recognition and personal thank-yous from execs.

9. Rearrange the furniture. After a layoff, an empty cubicle is a daily reminder to those who remain that someone has lost his or her job. If cutbacks have emptied workstations, reconfigure the space or reassign the cubicles so all seats are filled.

Note: If employees have taken on more or different work, they may need more space, different kinds of workstations or bigger file cabinets.

10. Teach coping skills. "Effectively coping with stress is a skill, just like playing golf," says psychologist Elizabeth Lombardo. "Some people are naturals, while most of us need training." Arrange for a brown-bag lunch with a counselor or social worker who can teach employees how to better deal with economic stresses like money woes, time constraints, work demands and uncertainty.

11. Hold Gen Y's hand. While a Bankrate survey shows that employees age 50 or older feel more insecure about their jobs than those in their 20s, a report by Boston College's Sloan Center on Aging & Work finds that seasoned workers are more likely to remain more productive than their younger colleagues. That's because older employees have lived through economic ups and downs before, so they're more resilient.

Tip: Reach out to young employees with advice and assurance via blogs on your organization's intranet or through regular e-mails.

12. Encourage vacations. About a third of executives in a Robert Half International survey say they'll skip their vacations so they can focus on getting their organizations through the recession. Still, their employees should not skip theirs. A company's hardest-working employees often are the ones who delay vacations during busy periods—and that can lead to burnout. Retain your stars by encouraging them to use their paid time off.

4 steps for managing 'survivor syndrome'

What it is

Survivor syndrome: A marked decrease in motivation, engagement and productivity after a layoff.

Who gets it

Employees who don't lose their jobs when their friends and colleagues do.

The symptoms

- Employees feel it's "us against them" after management cuts staff.
- Workers believe the layoffs are unfair and based on impulse rather than strategy.
- Rumors and gossip about the layoffs arise.
- Employee engagement in the job decreases.

The solutions

Communication, transparency and trust, according to The Conference Board. Here's what you can do:

- 1. Beef up internal communication.** Use blogs, staff meetings and brown-bag lunches to keep employees up-to-date about your organization's situation and help them understand that layoffs are part of a well-planned business strategy.
- 2. Train employees so they feel prepared** and competent to take on the responsibilities they inherit from their laid-off colleagues.
- 3. Involve employees in decisions** about downsizing whenever possible. Someone whose job is on the chopping block, for instance, might have a preference for when to leave or might have suggestions for how to distribute her work once she's gone.
- 4. Offer stress-management** and career counseling to employees who lose their jobs. The way you treat your soon-to-be-former employees has a lot to do with how the "survivors" treat your organization.