



Employee Engagement in Uncertain Times

Whether your department is experiencing layoffs* or not, nearly everyone at MIT is feeling the effects of the current and pending budget cuts. When people are anxious they can become fearful or demoralized. Evidence of this might be more rumors or gossip and less collegial relationships. All of these behaviors can lead to decreased productivity exactly at the time when we need to work more effectively, often with reduced resources.

As a manager, you can have an enormous impact on the climate in your unit. This tip sheet is designed to identify some specific steps you can take to keep morale high and to keep employees engaged. Employee engagement is a term used to describe that emotional connection that an employee feels for his/her workplace. Colloquially, employee engagement is evident when employees bring their hearts, minds, and spirits – not just their bodies – to work each day.

A Towers Perrin Talent Study identified five top drivers for maintaining high employee engagement. They are listed below, in order of importance, along with some ideas for how you can leverage these drivers on behalf of your employees and your department.

1st **Senior management interest in employees**

Frequent and open communication and honest dialogue are the clearest evidence of management interest in employees. It is especially important in times of uncertainty and change to communicate, communicate, communicate!

- Meet regularly with your staff – both 1:1 and as a group. Use these meetings to encourage information sharing among your staff – give them the chance to learn from each other.
- Encourage them to bring their questions to you. Answer what you can and tell them honestly when you don't know the answer to a question.
- Ask them to bring rumors to you before discussing them with coworkers. Address rumors by providing accurate information. This will help stop the spread of negativity.
- Make sure you share as much as you can about what cuts are being made and why.
- Be available to employees. Seek them out and have an open door policy so that they can approach you easily.

Listen carefully, with an open mind and without defensiveness. Know that you can't fix everything that is troubling your staff, but you can acknowledge their concerns.

Show frequent and honest appreciation. Even a simple thank you goes a long way to demonstrate your commitment to your staff. (See also "*Employee Recognition: An Important Currency for Lean Economic Times*" for more information.)

2nd **Challenging work**

Times of change are also times of opportunity. Think about ways to give your staff a chance to learn and develop.

* Managers in departments with layoffs should be sure to obtain the document "*A Manager's Guide to Conducting Layoff Meetings*," January 2009, from their HRO.



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- Ask your staff to identify which parts of their job are most interesting or satisfying to them. Work with them to find ways to leverage these tasks.
- Ask them what they need to feel like they are doing their best work, and help them move in that direction as well as you can.

Make sure that each employee can see how his/her work furthers your department's goals and how your department's work or goals support MIT's mission.

3rd **Decision-making authority**

Consider change as an opportunity to do things differently; model this point of view for your staff. Think about new or additional ways you can use your staff's experience and expertise to manage the work and make them feel valued.

- Give employees appropriate opportunities to make decisions about their own work. Pay attention, offer support, make sure they're moving in the right direction and then let them proceed on their own.
- Involve employees wherever possible in problem-solving or decision-making about work in your area.
- Request their input and ideas about how to improve efficiency or how to decide which tasks can be outsourced or dropped.

4th **Customer orientation**

Help employees focus on the work of your unit and the work of MIT. How can they bring their best selves to the work at hand?

- Who are their customers and how can they best serve them?
- How might customers' needs be changing as their own departments undergo change?
- How can we all keep our collective focus on MIT's mission and the things that make MIT great?

5th **Career advancement opportunities**

Now is the worst possible time for employees to hunker down and stop developing. Encourage employees to set goals for themselves – for both their current position and for their longer term career interests.

- Help them get the training and information to meet these goals.
- Checking on their progress, encouraging them and holding them accountable are additional ways you can demonstrate your interest.

A few final thoughts

Model emotional self-control by openly refusing to worry about the unknown or the future. Encourage others to focus on what they can control.

Take advantage of the many MIT resources available to you. For more information, contact your HRO (http://web.mit.edu/hr/empservices/hro_depts.html) or your OD Consultant (oad-request@mit.edu).