

# Staffing Decisions™



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## Should You Survey Employees' Thinking Now?

**S**ales are down, expenses are up and there don't seem to be any bright spots on the horizon. The news — inside and out — is dismal. You wonder what employees may be thinking, but should you ask? "It's probably

not a good time," you reason.

You could be wrong.

It is not uncommon for organizations and their leaders, especially during difficult times, to avoid asking employees tough questions or seeking input about how employees are feeling about their jobs, leaders, organizations and futures. But this is when you most need feedback.

Most important is a commitment to following up on what you hear, good or bad. Organizations with a poor track record of following up on, and being responsive to, employee feedback shouldn't even bother surveying, says Horn.

### Timing is Important

Companies need to carefully consider timing when making a decision about whether or when to do an employee attitude assessment or survey. Roberta Chinsky Matuson, owner of Boston's Human Resource Solutions ([www.yourhrexperth.com](http://www.yourhrexperth.com)) says, "Would I recommend that you survey the day after you've done a layoff? No, but I equally wouldn't suggest you keep your head in the sand and think that everything is fine even though your gut tells you that there's a lot of discontent. You've got to strike a balance"

Regardless of whether you conduct formal surveys, you need to keep your finger on the pulse of employees' thoughts and feelings, at least with walk-around management, frequent discussions and careful observation. ▲



### Avon Calling

Marc Effron, vice president of talent management for Avon Products, New York, says that Avon started its "engagement survey" about three years ago, immediately after a major turnaround effort. "It was probably one of the most difficult times in our company's history," he says. Yet, despite that, introducing the survey sent a positive message to the organization. "It was a good demonstration that we care about their opinions, whether times are good or not," says Effron.

### Maybe Not

Not all experts agree. In fact, some caution against introducing a new survey during difficult times because mutual trust may not exist. Karen Horn, a vice president at Washington Mutual in Seattle, says, "I put it into two buckets: If you have an ongoing survey process and the next scheduled survey comes at a down time, I absolutely would continue." On the other hand, for organizations that have not surveyed employees previously, it can be challenging and even misleading to conduct a survey. Besides, if you don't have data from previous surveys to compare, it will be difficult to evaluate results of a survey taken in bad times.

### Hot on the Inside

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Office politics are a fact of life. Here are some tips on winning the political games.

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Networking is important for you and your organization. But no one likes "working a room" full of strangers. These suggestions may help you be more effective.

# Leading in a Tough Economy

**T**ough economic times create tough challenges for HR professionals and managers.

How can costs be cut without hampering productivity and morale? How can communication efforts be bolstered to ensure employees are sufficiently engaged? How can difficult decisions be implemented with minimal disruption and negative impact?

When the news media constantly broadcast reports of layoffs, bankruptcies and business closings, employees are understandably on edge. Never has the need for open communication and opportunities for feedback been greater. You really need to ensure that employees are being kept up-to-date on issues that affect your organization and their paychecks.

## Staying in Touch

- Spend time with employees. Hold town hall-type meetings to give employees an opportunity to ask questions and receive candid answers. Interact with employees on their turf: work settings, break areas, etc. “Management by walking around” is more important than ever.
- Encourage senior leaders to be visible. When top management is out of sight, employees worry that something is going on.
- If something *is* going on, encourage leaders to be as forthcoming as they can about who, what, when, where,



why and how. In the absence of information, employees will fill in the blanks — usually with the most-pessimistic speculations possible—and this could lead to some of your best people looking for jobs elsewhere.

- Offer plenty of avenues for feedback and input: one-on-one, old-fashioned suggestion boxes or new-technology forums like chat rooms, blogs or social networking sites.
- Communicate often, in many ways — once is not enough. Engaging in an ongoing dialogue with employees keeps you aware of what’s on their minds, and enables you to respond to concerns they have before misinformation causes serious problems with morale and retention. ▲

## Temps Bring Strong Experience to the Table

Difficult as these times are — and they’re tough for everyone — there is one silver lining when it comes to finding good temporary employees: A lot of them are top-flight workers who bring a wealth of experience to their jobs.

Many of our temporary workers find themselves available because, in spite of their high levels of talent and ability, the organizations they worked for were unable to navigate the downturn. But when these employees come to work for you, they bring all the experience, ability and dedication they’ve developed in years of success in the workplace.

## Actions for Tough Times

Here are three key actions corporate leaders and managers can take to help weather downturns (according to research by The Forum Corp., a Boston consulting company):

- **Make it safe for employees to raise questions.** Leaders who admit they don’t have all the answers and ask for input empower their people to contribute their best ideas.
- **Communicate authentically.** Strong leaders acknowledge challenges and, by doing so, build trust among followers. Rather than being a sign of weakness, it’s a sign of strength.
- **Make sure everyone is on the same page.** When alignment on key goals is absent, performance suffers. Effective leaders frame an agenda and meet with key stakeholders to gain support and build commitment. Ineffective leaders let interoffice politics fester and hidden agendas dominate.

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# Mastering Office Politics

People say they hate office politics — sometimes even when they are major players themselves. Employees often say they wish politics would go away. But politics are a fact of life, so you might as well learn to play the game well. Those who can master the art of office politics and create a positive experience can build stronger relationships and greater career opportunities.

John McKee is a business success coach ([www.johnmckee.com](http://www.johnmckee.com)) who offers a number of tactics for succeeding in even the most highly charged political climate:

**OVER-COMMUNICATE.** Let others know what you're working on. If you think withholding information will allow you to surreptitiously gain professional yardage, think twice.

**DEVELOP MENTORS.** Mentors don't need to be insiders, They just need to provide you with new, fresh and completely unbiased perspectives on both your personal style and how your company's politics are working.

**ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS.** "Ask a lot of questions of different people in different areas of the company, and then shut up," says McKee. Hearing varied perspectives helps you gain a broader view and may change your opinions.

**SEEK CONSTANT FEEDBACK.** Talk about what just took place in that meeting you attended, what the last message from the corporate office *really* said, how you did in a recent presentation.

**GET BUY-IN.** Ensure that everyone who may be influenced by your programs or initiatives feels like they've been involved — or at least have had an opportunity to weigh in with their opinions or recommendations.

**GIVE DUE CREDIT.** Credit those on your team who deserve it, but don't miss an opportunity to take credit for your own work as well.

**WATCH YOUR STYLE.** How you present yourself to others will make a big difference in how you're perceived. Too often we mistakenly think our outward appearance, or use of PowerPoint or our buzzwords and jargon, will be universally accepted. That may not always be the case. Get other opinions. ▲

## Are 'Special Perks' Going Away?

It doesn't seem so long ago that companies were coming up with ever-more-innovative ways of offering "special perks" to employees — personal concierge services, on-site dry cleaning and massage, employer-sponsored sports teams, food services, travel-planning services, and other nontraditional extras. But how common are these special perks now, in an economy of high unemployment and increasing budget cuts?

A Watson Wyatt survey of 248 employers indicates that employers have already made, or expect to make, changes over the next 12 months in response to events in the economy and financial markets:

	Already made (%)	Expect to Make (%)	No Change Expected (%)
Mandatory holiday shutdown	6	2	92
Eliminate or reduce training	10	18	72
Raise employee contributions for health insurance	21	25	54
Freeze/close pension plan	11	4	86
Reduce employer 401(k)/403(b) match	2	4	94
Downgrade or cancel holiday party	18	18	64
Reduce or eliminate other employee programs	8	11	81
Add/increase restrictions on travel policy	34	21	45

For more information: <http://www.watsonwyatt.com/news/press.asp?ID=19962>

Another recent survey by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., Chicago, showed similar results to this question: "Has your company considered eliminating any employee perks in light of the economic slowdown?"

Existing perks will remain in place.	56.7%
We have made cuts in our perks package.	20.0%
We do not offer perks.	13.3%
We have considered cutting perks, but no action has been taken.	10.0%

For more information: <http://challengeratworkblog.blogspot.com/2008/10/survey-results-employer-try-to-protect.html>

Today's HR departments have become much more strategic in their approach to benefit design, recognizing that a total benefit package is a key element in attracting and retaining staff.

In addition, companies are placing more attention on their performance management systems, tying rewards more closely to desired outcomes. The environment is changing, says Barbara Poole, CEO of Employaid (<http://www.employaid.com>), an online community for employees to find resources for career success. "Today, perks go to only those with the most retainable and useful skill sets."

**Bottom line:** Employers in any industry, regardless of the economy, will do whatever is necessary to attract and retain key staff.

### Other links you may find useful in mastering office politics:

9 Ways to Win at Office Politics from CareerBuilder.com. <http://www.career-builder.com/Article/CB-814-The-Workplace-Nine-Ways-to-Win-at-Office-Politics/>

The Good Guys' (and Gals') Guide to Office Politics from Fast Company. <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/14/politics.html>

How to Win at Office Politics from BNET business network. [http://www.bnet.com/2403-13070\\_23-93243.html](http://www.bnet.com/2403-13070_23-93243.html)

## Networking

# The Keys to 'Working a Room'

Is business networking fun? Hardly. Few people relish entering a room to make conversation with a bunch of strangers. But business realities are that there will be multiple occasions when we must do just that.

However, it may be easier to enter that roomful of people if you realize networking is more about making connections than about selling yourself or your organization.

### Giving, Not Getting

Joe Takash, author of *Results Through Relationships: Building Trust, Performance, and Profit Through People* (Wiley, 2008), says, "The biggest misconception about networking is that it is about getting. In fact, it is about giving." The bigger investment we make in giving to other people, the more likely they are to reciprocate.

### Have a Goal

Networking should be considered a professional activity, not a casual event, says Alice Waagen, president of Workforce Learning, in Washington, DC. "The most important lesson I learned early on was to establish for yourself your goal or objective before you go to the event," she says. "That way you keep focused on your goals, and don't get distracted by the hors d'oeuvres, drinks or your best buddy across the room."

Dale Chapman Webb, director of The

Protocol Centre, a business-etiquette training firm in Coral Gables, FL, agrees. "Networking is socializing with a plan," he says.

Do your research on what the event is about and whom you might meet. Lay out the goals you want to accomplish.

### Listen

One way to help ease anxiety is to realize that simply being a good listener is more than half the battle.

"Forget elevator speeches and infomercials about yourself that 'experts' often advocate," advises Jeanne Hurlbert, who heads Optnet Resources, LLC, a Baton Rouge, LA, firm that helps business women build social networks. Instead, focus on listening. If you listen intently to your conversational partner, you'll quickly pick up cues to help you connect.



One overlooked component to great listening is asking open-ended questions. Getting people to open up engages them so you can find common ground and common links.

### Follow up

Of course, it is not enough to simply make connections. Successful networkers know they need to follow up and nurture any contacts they make.

"If you're not reminding your business friends of what you do and that you're still out there doing it on a very regular basis, you might as well stop wasting your time and energy on business development," says Ken Lizotte, CIO (Chief Imaginative Officer) of emerson consulting group, in Concord, MA, and the author of *The Expert's Edge: Become the Go-To Authority People Turn to Every Time* (McGraw-Hill, 2007).

"I would follow up immediately by finding a way to stay in front of them that will provide reciprocal value," he says. This might mean sending an article, providing them with information, referring them to a contact, etc. Part of listening and looking for common ground should be about discovering opportunities for meaningful follow-up.

Networking is a lot like working out. You don't feel like doing it, but you grit your teeth and do it anyway; and when you see the results, you're almost always glad you did it. ▲

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