

Good leadership: engaging with 'wounded' employees

By David Grossman

2009 was a year of unprecedented challenges and change. Economic crisis. Cutbacks, layoffs, reduced budgets. Increased globalization. Changing workforce demographics. Virtual employees. Pressures on the work/family balance. The list could easily go on.

Whether you're working at a PR firm or inside a company handling communications, there's a "new normal" that

exists among an even more skeptical and — in many cases — "wounded" workforce. According to Watson Wyatt, engagement scores for all employees in the U.S. have declined by nine percent since last year. Worse, engagement scores for top-performing companies dropped by 23 percent at companies undergoing significant cost-cutting.

As 2010 begins, leaders need to examine what they must do to engage their workforce. Here are five resolutions that can help you take your company, agency or team into the next

decade. With empathy, courage and discipline:

- **Get a mirror (for yourself and for your leadership).** Great leaders know themselves. Every leader should have a mirror on his or her desk as a constant reminder of the influence they can have. They need to understand their leadership style, knowing that communication and leadership begins and ends with them.

- **Plan your communication.** As with every other strategic discipline inside organizations today, communication is planned beginning with the business outcome. Think outcome, audience, message, method, and evaluation. And don't wait until you have all the information. That's a sure-fire way to feed the grapevine. Chances are you have enough information that would be valuable to employees. Tell them what you know, what you don't know, when you're going to find out additional information, and bust myths or misperceptions.

- **Listen first — listen second — and then communicate.** There's a reason we have two ears and one mouth. Ask questions first and then actively listen to responses. Then listen some more. Check your understanding by paraphrasing what you hear. Allow employees to vent. Empathize and re-frame issues where needed. Your goal should be to help them understand what's happening, why, and how it impacts them. Ensure all communications are consistent, constant and honest.

People will read into a leader's behavior when he or she withholds information or avoids communicating. Leaders communicate whether they intend to or not. Effective communication provides the right information, prevents misinformation and drama, and can engender a sense of pride, commitment, and trust that keeps employees coming back and giving their best effort.

- **Think about who else needs to know information.** At the end of every meeting, or when you make key decisions, ask yourself: who else needs to know this information, how will they get it, and who will get it to them. This ensures you're keeping others with a need-to-know informed and everyone aligned.

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