



Even thin cats need calories: Making the recession work

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The recession is an excellent opportunity to look at the performance of your staff and cut the metaphorical fat by losing those who are not performing to their full potential, says Anton Franckeiss.

What does a recession give you? For company owner, director, manager or employee alike, it will undoubtedly bring stress and anxiety, but – at least for businesses – even the seemingly darkest cloud can offer more than just more rain. A recession can, perhaps, be an excellent time to promote the cream ... and cut the metaphorical fat?

If you can forgive the tangle of food-related metaphors, there is only ever one cake. Its size is governed by the quantity of ingredients that income can buy: if there's one thing you can't give more than 100% of, it's that metaphorical cake. Staff costs are, of course, a large part of the operational overheads of nearly every business. Without more income – and more cake – you can't spend more on both salaries *and* training without cutting somewhere else.

So, if everything else is already pared back to as modest a portion as on-going health allows, you need to make decisions. One of the ambiguous blessings of a recession is that the concept of redundancy may remain sensitive, but it's no longer a taboo: enjoyable or not, something – or someone – has got to go.

It's all in the graph

So having 'thought the unthinkable', how do you proceed? This is not that simple, as the dilemma is an age-old one. How do you identify and categorise those who work for you in terms of their potential and their desire to learn and develop? Well, try drawing a graph. The vertical axis represents skill, the horizontal one represents will. You should – if your performance measurement and management systems and processes are in place – be able to plot everyone in your organisation on that graph.

The top-right quarter of your graph represents high skill/high will. These people are performing well, managing roles or tasks effectively and efficiently, and have good working relationships. They are your cream: your real talent. Give them the confidence to know that they can realise their ambitions and then point them in the right direction and provide them with challenges and responsibilities.

The bottom-left quarter is home to those with low skill and matching will. They perform to the bare minimum (if that), fail or refuse to support others, and act – explicitly or unwittingly – as a brake on initiatives. They possess neither the skills nor the focus and determination to improve. As well as burdening those in the business who are pulling their weight, these people will burn time and distract the business from what it really needs to focus on. If money invested here in training and development won't produce dividends, then spend it where it can do some good – training the willing or hiring the skilled.

Struggling staff

To their right are a more inspiring group, although one that still provides a challenge: the highly-willed but under-skilled. Every company has staff who struggle to varying degrees at different times, need training, and would benefit from more senior support. They have the desire and commitment to be better but they currently lack the skills to achieve their ambitions. Resources currently being spent on the chronically underperforming could be redirected here to provide training and coaching that will enable them to develop.

So, we come to the last and in many ways most frustrating category - those with the skills to really contribute to the success and development of the business, but whose will is questionable. Most people do not take jobs simply to hate them and under-perform in them. People sometimes struggle with certain positions or tasks for valid reasons, but those can often be addressed. If the will can be generated cost-effectively, then do so: these people have demonstrated the skill, but must acquire and demonstrate the willingness to deploy it.

But those who stubbornly continue to lack motivation and commitment to develop, drive forward the business and steer their own development are the most resource intensive. We can see the potential and probably feel we should be able to realise. We may even internalise this and take responsibility for the failing - even if we have made every effort, sought advice and acted on any proffered recommendations, provided coaching, mentoring and so on. Yet surely that time has to come to shout "enough!" - enough time and energy expended, and enough attention paid to a small but disruptive minority. Those who will not help you to help them need to find another home, another place to employ them: not yours. (If you've just lost a whole department, of course, you have a bigger issue ...)

So why not promote the cream, and just siphon off the rest? Surely even the most hesitant manager currently has an economic environment that - at the very least - legitimises getting rid of the dead weight?

Anton Franckeiss is practice director UK at behavioural consultancy ASK.

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