

Restoring Optimism in a Down Period

By David H. Maister

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Jimmy,

You may recall that I asked you what you'd like me to write my next article on, and you said something to the effect of "restoring optimism after a rough period."

I haven't written the article but have put down a few thoughts. I haven't edited myself but just put down some initial thoughts.

You'll disagree with some of these things and you'll be doing others, but maybe there's also something here that you agree with and are not yet doing. At worst, it will stimulate your own thinking. Anyway, here goes!

My first thought is that little can be done "in the mass." (Remember the "raspberry jam" principle: the wider you spread it, the thinner it gets!) That means ratcheting up the level of individualized attention. You can't manage emotions by numbers; you can only do it face to face and preferably one on one.

I would guess that given the current rough times, people feel a little "helpless"—not sure about what to do. Therefore there is a need for *help*.

In tough economic times there's a tendency for firm managers to edge away from the coach role and become more like policemen, administrators and bosses (watching the numbers like a hawk). Obviously this is necessary, but

so is coaching: offering suggestions, being supportive, being a source of creative ideas, helping people think through their roles and helping them make the best use of their time. I know you believe in this but there's a question: How much of this is really going on? How much are you doing? Everyone knows you want results but what are you doing to *help them* (particularly the average Joe or Jane on the front lines) get results?

How about this idea? Are you conducting a series of office visits, not to give a speech but to be available to answer questions and offer ideas about their local practice issues? You're a smart guy who's been there. You're a really valuable resource to anyone who can get your time. Call these visits "mini planning sessions for the office," with you as a creative resource.

The reason I believe this will work is that you'll be able to break the (local) logjam of, "We can't do anything. It's rough out there." Help your people come up with action plans. I realize that you can't visit them all but the grapevine works well.

Maybe you can form a visiting committee of senior people to do some of this. Remember, I'm talking about *helping*. You already do planning, budgeting and visits from senior folks; but I'd guess that the typical partner

doesn't see this as a vehicle for help but as an oversight exercise.

I'm making two points: The "depressed" (nonoptimistic) professional needs help (now!) *and* ideas. Asking (or telling) the person they should work harder or do *more* isn't inspiring. What they want is ideas about ways to do something different. They're probably doing what they know how to do, and if they aren't it's because of the depression. There's a barrier there.

Newness is at a premium when people are down: They often can't get themselves up to do the same old stuff, but give them a new task to perform and they may discover renewed energy, interest, etc. Hence, you should take every opportunity to find new roles for people. I'm not talking about major reassignments, but new marketing tasks, etc.

Which leads me to my next point, the key to all this being nonbillable time: How do people spend it? What are they doing? What should they be doing? In most firms, billable time is carefully managed but nonbillable time is a sinkhole. A lot of professionals waste a lot of it sitting around, wringing their hands, hiding out in their offices. No one knows or cares and certainly doesn't monitor the nonbillable efforts.

I would advocate a "new" program of "nonbillable time budgeting." It's really nothing more than an individualized, personalized career planning system, but it *is* different from what's being done. It's *not* performance appraisal, and it's not *goal setting*. It's *action planning*.

Goals are ephemeral and made up of a wish list. An action plan is concrete, specific, understandable and much more motivating to a depressed

(nonoptimistic) person. "Tell me what I should/can *do*," is the normal cry. So...

The practice leaders sit down with each partner and say, "Looking at the next three months, how much nonbillable time do you have available? Right, let's talk about what you're going to do with it. What activities make sense for you and the office/firm? Whose help do you need?"

"Let's not talk about annual goals; instead, we'll take it a step at a time. Let's only worry about the next three months; come to an agreement on actions, teams, etc.; and develop a "contract" for doing X things. We'll meet again in three months to see how they went (or earlier if you need my help)."

This sounds simple—and it is—but there's not a lot of it going on. It works because you can't be depressed when you're busy and active. You turn people's emotions around by getting them doing something, anything. The short term is achievable; the long term is terrifying.

Pygmalion is relevant here. If you treat people like winners they'll turn out to be winners. Unfortunately, being micromanaged doesn't feel like you're being treated as a winner.

There's also the Hawthorne effect: People perform better when they think someone cares and notices what they're doing. The trouble with the professions today is that the average partner isn't very energized and excited at the best of times, let alone in a recession. The vast bulk of them feel like cogs in the machinery. Hence, my emphasis on designing "individualized" management processes is the key to restoring an upbeat mode.

I've already said this but you have to get out and about to the offices. One way to influence mood is to be the role model (a *key point*), but you can't be an effective role model unless you're face to face.

"Off-line" sessions such as conferences and meetings don't count as much. It's way more powerful to visit them where they live. You've got to be seen to be involved in the nuts and bolts of the business.

Leaders must be seen as making their own sacrifices if others are to do so as well. What (visible) sacrifices have you made? What sacrifices do your partners think you've made? Apart from tighter financial controls, what has HQ done that's different?

They (the partners) want to know what you're going to do to turn the situation around. Where's the positive action that comes across as new, creative, a smart idea or a clever response to the situation? (You've probably got answers to all this.)

In any event, if people see the firm acting in a positive, "optimistic" way, they'll be positive, too. But in many firms, all the partners see from firm management is a bunch of tactics that come across as scared, nervous, panicky and downbeat (tighten controls, fire partners, cut support costs).

I'm not saying these actions are wrong, merely pointing out that they do not convey optimism.

People don't want inspirational speeches or grand strategies when they're depressed. This is not the time for "rah, rah, rah." In fact, it backfires. People say, "We're in pain and he's so out of it with his unrealistic visions." All your speeches should begin, "If I were you,

here are the four or five things I'd do differently than in the past."

I'd focus people even more on their own local practice. If they start thinking and worrying about where the firm is going or the state of the nation as a whole, they just get distracted. I'd try to keep people focused on what's going on in their area and back off talking about the firm.

Obviously, I'm not saying to hide anything but just don't push it. As an example, line partners hear too much about megaclients, international activities, technology and other grand strategies, which can be demotivating if they interpret this information as, "Those guys don't care about me and my practice. They live in a different world."

People need an opportunity to bitch. (My sister, Frances Sacker, who was a consultant in England, calls this "squeezing the stress sponge.")

People can only absorb so much hassle. After a while, the sponge is saturated and it starts to "weep." If you give people a chance to vent their feelings, you empty the sponge and create the capacity for them to absorb more stress.

But they need to talk about **THEIR** work and **THEIR** lives. What mechanisms are in place for this to happen? (It's dangerous in the typical professional firm to show your stress: bitch too much in an environment where people are being laid off and you may be committing suicide!)

Obviously, to create optimism you must reward early successes and small triumphs. There's a need to increase the number of celebrations, formal and informal. In the past you celebrated the big things—now you must celebrate the small.

And you must learn to use more “currencies.” In tight straits you can’t be generous with cash, but there are other rewards, including the following (taken from my book, *First Among Equals*, coauthored with Patrick McKenna):

Approval

Gratitude

Autonomy

Participation/Involvement

Personal Interest/Support

Recognition

Visibility (inside and outside the office)

Contacts

Access to Information (“insider”)

Access to Additional Resources

Rapid Response (access to manager)

Task Support

Titles (official and “unofficial”)

Special Roles or Assignments

Challenges

Meaning

I wonder how many of your managers know how to use these tools?

Anyway, that’s enough rambling for now. All the best and good luck!

David



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