

Staying Upbeat In Downturns

Gary M. Stern Gary M. Stern Fri Dec 12, 5:43 pm ET



Never underestimate the power of positive thinking -- especially in times like these.

A psychologist tells the tale of two workers who survived a downsizing at a company. One returns home and tells her husband that she's next to be let go; her performance falters and she's dismissed. Another employee seizes the chance to help the firm grow, heads a task force to find new business and gains a promotion. Both faced the same situation. But one's attitude led to success and the other to getting laid off.

Keeping a positive attitude during an economic crisis replete with massive layoffs, a falling stock market and no end in sight isn't easy. Nonetheless, experts say the people who stay positive in hard times emerge as winners while naysayers often become victims and fall by the wayside. In this volatile economy, it's not always the people with the best skills who survive but those who are most resilient and adaptive.

The key to generating positive energy in a tough economic climate is "taking initiative," says Roger Fritz, author of "The Power of a Positive Attitude: Discovering the Keys to Success." Employees who figure out ways to innovate in a crisis advance. Employees who complain and blame others undermine their own efforts.

Keeping a healthy outlook when downsizing is the norm isn't easy. But a key first step is to focus on "what you can control and can't control. You can control how you respond to a situation," said Kenneth De Meuse, an industrial psychologist and associate vice president for research at Korn Ferry Leadership & Talent Consulting in Minneapolis.

If you're still on the job when others have been booted, affirm to yourself that you've come out of a tough time OK and can endure.

Think Like A CEO

To thrive during tough times, Jeffrey Hull, who runs Life Shifting, a private employment coaching service in New York City, urges his clients to "think like the CEO and stop blaming the CEO."

If workers see themselves as running their own business within the company and accept accountability for their actions, they transcend any crisis, he says. Everyone at a company should see themselves in a leadership role. If employees go to their boss with new ideas that add value to a firm, it can play a role in lifting revenue.

Hull also tells employees to take a long-term view of their company, not a short-term, myopic one.

"When many people face stress, they tend to get granular, tactical and easily forget that things may not be that bad and that this too will pass," he said. Employees who take a step back, see the big picture and view issues as part of a larger strategy can survive a crisis.

Positive people tend to be energetic, which allows them to be more creative. "If you have a positive attitude, even in difficult times, you draw positive things toward you," Hull said. People who are down in the dumps gravitate toward other morose people, and together they bring themselves down.

"People who have a doomsday philosophy become victims; it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy," Hull said.

People who are persistently negative tend to feel increased stress and often miss work, are late, make more errors and suffer performance lapses, De Meuse says. Negative thinking reinforces itself and easily leads to a person spiraling downward or suffering depression.

Hull describes working with a vice president of a retail bank in New York City who was often disillusioned with his bosses' decisions.

He was positive with his staff but would relay directives from above by saying, "The bosses told me to tell you." He was oblivious that his promptings were subverting the policies of senior managers and were turning him into a victim. Hull says the man needed to realize that even middle managers are in leadership positions and must find a positive way to communicate and interpret their bosses' decisions without undercutting them.

Communicating Is Key

Though individuals control their own thoughts, companies can take measures to create a positive environment despite downsizing and bad economic times. "How the information is communicated becomes key," De Meuse said. If the company stresses that it must

reposition itself to stay competitive for the future and explains its new global approach to staff, the bad news is easier to swallow. Moreover, companies need to follow up these CEO meetings with departmental conferences, one-on-one consultations and counseling sessions.

Here are a few tips to remember on how a positive attitude can help people survive an economic crisis:

Ask what you can do to help out your business or area. "There's nothing more appreciated by anyone in an organization than an offer to help," Hull said.

Become responsive, not reactive. In tough times, some people go into overdrive and overreact because they're so fearful that they're going to lose their job. Instead, think strategically and don't react impulsively.

A positive attitude doesn't mean ignoring facts. Fritz says one way to stay positive is to ask incisive questions, eliciting from the boss what can be done to move the company forward. "Having a positive attitude should enable you to take in more information and analyze it objectively," he said.

The worst thing you can do is to isolate yourself in tough times. "Instead of maintaining contacts, attending conferences, reaching out to colleges, some people withdraw. That can lead to depression and meltdown," Hull said.

If you are laid off, remember that not all downsizing has negative outcomes. De Meuse says being laid off enables many corporate workers who weren't satisfied on the job to reinvent themselves. He knows many who became entrepreneurs and ended up much happier.

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