



Motivating Your Staff During a **Down Economy**

Learn how Primary Freight ensured quality and service wouldn't suffer when it went to a four-day workweek.

By John Brown

Stress, anxiety and fear in the workplace can lead to burnout, less productivity, tension between coworkers, increased absenteeism and even health problems. The news of other companies undergoing major staff reductions is enough to produce negative feelings in anyone, from a warehouse worker to a top-level executive. So, it was a hard pill to swallow when I heard that we needed to cut salary expenditures by 20% across the board.

This was the equivalent of laying off 18 employees across our three offices. No one enjoys letting team members go, and the thought of losing that number, many of whom needed their healthcare and income to support their families, kept me up for nights on end. Ultimately, we decided to shorten all employee workweeks to four days, which allowed everyone to keep their jobs, but it still was not easy news to give or receive in a time when layoffs and company failures make headlines every day.

Now that we had made the decision to shorten employee workweek, the last thing we needed was for the quality of work and service to decrease. As a service-based company, Primary Freight's product is really our workers, and we need to keep those workers physically and mentally healthy, now more than ever. So we immediately launched a support and training program with the help of Neil Reubens, a professional business coach, and the Motivational Training Institute. The program lasted six weeks, was launched prior to the change in work schedule, and was entitled "Battling Burnout and Regaining Control." The staff learned coping skills for the loss of income and techniques to adjust their attitudes about

the situation. The sessions also focused on how to take control of that fifth day to recoup lost wages and build stronger family relationships.

The program took us through a series of assessments: symptoms of being on our way to or already experiencing burnout, the causes of stress we experience both inside and outside of the workplace, and identifying negative emotions as a result of that stress. We then explored coping methods, such as building self-esteem, embracing the present, expressing and accepting gratitude, and maintaining optimism to help reduce stress, anxiety and fear.

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The reality of the situation is that employees did lose that extra day of work and income, but through the program they were able to turn the situation around and look at that "day off" as an actual benefit. Some use it to reclaim old hobbies, spend quality time with their families, or simply relax and wind down from the workweek.

We noticed a significant difference in not only attitude and workplace relations but productivity, as well. For the past 10 years, we have worked hard to create a comfortable, team atmosphere in all of our offices. However, the economic slowdown and uncertainty of the future can make the workplace a major source of stress, with employees unable to fully concentrate on the tasks at hand without lingering anxiety. While the fear of losing one's job isolates employees and hinders team efforts, promoting mental and physical health through programs and training sessions can help employees regain control of the

emotions that negatively affect their work so they can feel comfortable working with colleagues again.

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with employees—from in-person meetings to brief phone calls—could be an indication of employee insecurity or uneasiness. With the help of the training program, employees are able to continue to put their best foot forward and maintain a positive attitude when dealing with clients. In addition to improved customer service, mentally and physically healthier employees mean healthier work habits and an overall improvement in customer service.

Motivational training programs are also a way to reassure your employees that you have their best interests in mind, despite the need to cut costs. As part of the executive management team, it is important to understand the program and get a firm grasp of the tactics and tools it offers, but physically being present while your employees are

going through the sessions can sometimes cause them to feel nervous about expressing themselves freely while their boss is in the room.

When we started the programs, I was excited to be a part of the sessions along with the team. However, many of the sessions were designed as forum discussions in which employees were asked to express their fears and anxieties in relation to their jobs and to what extent they were feeling burnout from their workloads. Neil Reubens noticed that the presence of some of the executive management team was causing some of our employees to hold back, and they were not getting the full value out of the sessions. We ultimately decided it was best to go through the sessions separately to prevent this nervousness and help our employees get the most out of the program.

It is impossible to completely prevent stress, anxiety and fear in the workplace in trying economic times. Cutting costs is often a necessary evil, but it's important to consider all options when these difficult decisions present themselves. Although shortened workweeks may not be the best choice for every company, they are a feasible alternative to layoffs.

Regardless of a company's decision, in hard economic conditions, the mental and physical health of each and every employee is crucial. Playing a part in ensuring that health through company-wide programs is an ideal way to increase internal communication, keep employee attitudes positive, and maintain or even improve productivity levels. **MHM**

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