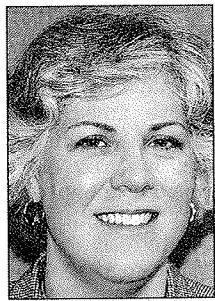

WORKPLACE MATTERS

To maintain morale in hard times, keep workers informed

Job security is in the front of everyone's mind. Even if an employee's job is not at risk, friends and family may be losing jobs. Bad economic news assaults everyone



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every day. Managers may find it difficult to keep employees focused and motivated during this uncertain time.

Mary Justis, a nationally known expert in leadership and communications training, is the founder and president of the Justis Group in Eugene. Her advice to manag-

ers is to "go back to basics" and recognize the power and importance of their relationships with their employees.

"People work for people, not companies. Managers need to become coaches that guide, support and encourage their employees," Justis said.

She believes what employees want most during this difficult time is to have a manager who listens. They want a conversation with their manager about their fears and concerns.

"Just listening diffuses the emotion behind the fear. It's amazing how much difference a 15 minute conversation can make." Justis encourages managers to be honest and share as much as they can about the company's circumstances.

Most employee anxiety comes from unknowns. Rumors can quickly fill any information void. Justis says the best rumor control is to face concerns directly. "Many managers don't

want to address gossip, but the reality is they don't have time not to deal with it."

Avis Dininio, manager at Newood Display Fixtures in Eugene, echoes Justis' recommendations. "Be honest. Let employees know what you are doing to stay in or gain business. Let them know how the order file looks." Dininio finds that employees rise to the occasion when they are kept in the loop. "An informed crew will pitch in and do whatever it takes, if you ask."

Many local businesses find that communication from the top, either from the chief executive officer or chief financial officer, goes a long way in reassuring employees. Jeri Ray, an administrator for Timber Products Co. in Springfield, said its CEO recently sent a letter to all employees and their families, outlining the steps that have been taken to ensure the company's stability and the challenges in the coming year. "We're doing our best to keep employees up to date on market conditions and order status," Ray said. "We're trying to make our challenges as transparent as possible."

Employers face some difficult decisions right now. Some made promises when the economy was sound and now wonder if they can follow through with them. Oregon Medical Laboratories initiated a wage study last year and planned to implement the recommended wage increases in October 2008. The economic forecast was not good. After deliberating, managers decided to follow through with the promised wage increase.

"We decided to keep our commitment to our employees," said Gloria Foust, OML's director of human resources and organizational development.

"We met with everyone individually and explained that we were going to give them a wage increase. In return, we asked that everyone give us ideas on how to cut costs and be more efficient. We believe we can find ways to make up for those extra wages."

GloryBee Foods of Eugene similarly asked its employees to team with company managers to "maintain both sales and people." RaeJean Wilson, human resources manager at GloryBee Foods in Eugene, said it is not planning to cut any positions, but it will be cutting profit margins. "We chose to add to our health and wellness program to encourage both physical and mental health, since there is adequate information to support that every dollar produces a savings in health care costs. Often, as high as 3½ times — that's a great return on investment." It is also focusing on enhancing training and education for their work teams.

Increased communication and making employees feel valued and appreciated goes a long way towards boosting morale. Employers should strive to balance keeping employees informed about the economic state of the company with more upbeat conversations about training and development.

Let employees know how they can contribute to the success of the company. Recognize employees that go an extra mile. When there are successes, celebrate them. Those businesses that are able to maintain good morale will reap the rewards no matter what the economic picture.

If you have questions about training your work force, contact Robin Onaclea, business service coordinator at Lane Workforce Partnership, at robino@laneworkforce.org or (541) 682-7224.