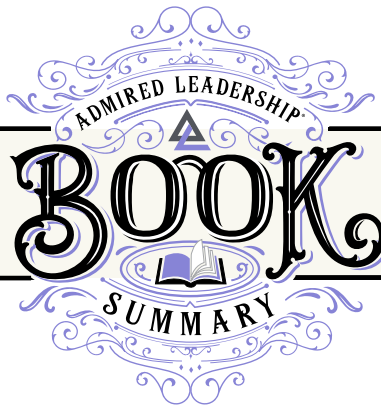




Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



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Top Talent

Keeping Performance Up When Business Is Down

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How can leaders keep their top performers and motivate them in times of corporate turmoil?

Top Talent is a practical blueprint for retaining talent and making the most of things in downturns, recessions, and industry upheaval. In it, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, economist and founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, describes eight actions CEOs can take to galvanize their best performers.

The Top Talent Challenge. In market downturns and in hard times for companies – as positive reinforcement, teamwork, promotions, and compensations tend to wane – the commitment level of a company’s top talent wanes, as well.

Create a “No-Spin” Zone. In troubled times, communicate more rather than less. Don’t “hunker down behind closed doors” in a communication bunker (p. 32).

Think Locally and Focus on Team Leaders. Personal connection with team leaders serves as a way to help people feel important, heard, and appreciated. The author quotes leadership experts who say, “People join companies but they leave managers” (p. 43).

Give Employees Meaningful Nonmonetary Rewards. “Acknowledge dedication and hard work” by being sure to say thank you and making use of nonmonetary rewards like flexible hours, public praise, and one-on-one time with leadership.

Develop a Fair Restructuring Process. Layoffs don’t just negatively affect those who leave but also the productivity of those who stay. How you handle reductions in force will impact your company. Leaders need to consider how to “protect and reassure your stars” (p. 68).

Hold on to Your Women. Losing top-talent women from your workforce has “serious long-term ramifications” (p. 78). Women and men aren’t “clones” of each other, and research shows that women are often motivated by things like providing value to clients, flexible work options, and giving back to the community.

Show That Top Leadership Cares. In tough times, the highest levels of leadership need to create touchpoints with people.

Re-create Pride, Purpose, and Direction. After a stressful period at a company, even top talent may feel “shaky” and unengaged. One leader explains that, “What a leader has to do is convey a sense of optimism about the future” (p. 102).

P.S. Don’t Forget Yourself. In times of high stress, leaders face intense pressure as people are depending on them. “Even while tending to the well-being of your team and organization, you should not ignore your personal welfare” (p. 115).

Key Concepts:

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

When business is down, overcommunicating is better than under-communicating. The author uses the example of a plane sitting on the runway, waiting for permission to take off. When they are told nothing, passengers become angry and frustrated. But when the captain gets on the PA and tells the passengers why they are waiting, how long they expect it to be, and promise to give updates, passengers are much more accepting of the delay.

People interpret a lack of communication as “bad news.” Sometimes you may have to simply say that you don’t know, but you will keep them updated as you have information. Even that amount of information is better than nothing.

People need to hear information not just from the CEO, but from their own managers. Senior leadership should provide “talking points” and detailed Q & As for managers and supervisors.

Use multiple forms of communication to share information – and do it frequently and repeatedly. “Politicians and marketing experts know that it takes an average of eight sightings (or viewings) for an advertisement’s message to sink in” (p. 35). Diverse and layered communication in troubled times not only allays fears but also fosters a sense of teamwork and togetherness.



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Consider expanding “the number of people you reach out to directly” and connect one-on-one with them. This provides a sense of “camaraderie” and also can help stem the spread of wrong information (pp. 37, 38). “The bottom line: instead of having people piece together facts and figures from random sources and make their own interpretations, bring accurate information directly to them” (p. 39).

Don’t spin. Be honest. Make sure you are listening as well as communicating. Invite people to share questions and concerns.

TEAM LEADERS ARE THE “GLUE” HOLDING THINGS TOGETHER

“Think locally and focus on team leaders” (p. 42). A CEO’s time to interact with other levels is limited, but the way to make the biggest impact with the least amount of time and effort is to concentrate on team leaders.

“In tough times, people skills can be more critical to long-term success” (p. 44). “Commonsense practices, such as listening, empathizing, and coaching, are always valuable, but never more so than during high-stress periods” (p. 44).

One CEO has his reports give him summaries of the reviews they have done of their direct reports so that the CEO himself can leave personal notes for the junior workers. Another CEO has a lunch every month for people with birthdays in that month. In just 18 man-hours per year, he has personal face time with every single employee. Another CEO holds “skip-level” lunches for the high-potential junior associates.

Whether or not you can compensate financially, you can give your high performers motivators that make them want to keep going – “challenge/stimulation, high-quality colleagues, [and] recognition/respect” (p. 46).

In uncertainty and downturns, a good strategy is “focusing your staff on concrete, doable tasks” (p. 48). Tough times also allow for staff to work on “stretch assignments” and grow professionally by being mentored. Be sure that, when they do take on new or more intense challenges, they are recognized.

REWARDS MATTER, BUT THEY DON’T HAVE TO BE MONETARY

Say “thank you!” and publicly recognize people’s efforts.

One leader explains, “I try to personalize everything. Even when I send a recognition note to a big group or team, I try to add a personalized paragraph in each person’s e-mail so it’s highly tailored to the individual” (p. 55).



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Other ways to reward and motivate top performers including things like one-on-one breakfast with the boss, wellness benefits, “remote work options, staggered hours, reduced-hour arrangements, sabbaticals,” and programs that encourage employees to “do good on company time” with volunteer programs (pp. 56, 59, 64).

DEVELOP A FAIR RESTRUCTURING PROCESS

“Callous” and embarrassingly handled layoffs negatively impact a company. These harm relationships with people who are now outside the company – people who may be your new clients and competitors. And you leave a bad taste in the mouth of the top talent who stays.

Explain why the layoffs are happening. As one leader says, “You can’t tell people they are walking the plank without telling them why” (p. 69).

One company has a four-stage contingency plan, including steps that will be taken in tough times to stave off layoffs. Layoffs only occur when the fourth stage is reached. “The benefit of this kind of contingency plan is the security it gives employees of knowing that many efforts will be made before the company gets to the point of letting people go” (p. 69).

As a senior leader, be sympathetic with and support the line managers who actually have the difficult conversation of laying people off. It is brutal job to perform. Role-playing the conversation can help.


When you can, give people some control. For example, provide “a creative use of flexible work assignments.” One company offered staff the option to volunteer for a 4-day work week at a 20 percent reduction in pay, a 12-week sabbatical at a 30 percent pay reduction, or the status quo.

Proactively help employees who have lost their jobs find work somewhere else. This not only helps the people who are laid off, but serves to show survivors that you will do what you can to help and, overall, it “minimizes ill will” (p. 74).


THE VALUE OF WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

Women are both more likely to be laid off and more likely to look to leave in certain sectors. Losing high-performing women hurts a company both in the short term and in the long term.

Research shows that having “significant numbers of women in management positions improves a company’s bottom line” (p. 78).



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Men and women often have different priorities at work, so different aspects of the job may appeal to them. One study showed that, “the top two drivers for male executives are career advancement and financial rewards, whereas the top two drivers for their female counterparts are high-quality colleagues and the desire to deliver a quality product to a customer or client” (p. 80). Another priority for women is a flexible workplace.

The following things have been proven to help “the retention and acceleration of women” at work.

1. “Establish a rich menu of flexible work arrangements.”
2. “Help women claim and sustain ambition.” Women’s networks can help with this.
3. “Harness altruism.” Women want to help their communities (pp. 82-84).

Companies that cannot hold on to women employees “risk tarnishing their reputation and brand “ (p. 88).

LEADERS WHO CARE

It is important during recessions and downturns that leaders at the highest levels show they care.

Some ways to do this are “skip-level” lunches between top leaders and more junior employees, maintaining leadership meetings and even increasing attendance at conferences, and increasing travel to visit with teams.

Networking groups and “pods” can also help people feel personally connected, and when senior leadership attends these, it shows they care

After layoffs, companies can show they care by providing safe outlets for people to process the stress through employee assistance programs. Engage leadership and managers to help come up with ideas to encourage and motivate top talent, too.

LEADERS WHO LOOK TO THE FUTURE

When your industry has been struggling, “it’s easy for even the most dedicated to lose energy and second-guess their goals and direction,” according to one senior executive. Hewlett reminds us that, “employees want to feel good about their companies” and “proud” of where they work (p. 102).

Leadership should “flaunt” the successes of their companies and the good they are doing. “Share stories that remind people that they’re part of a culture and an organization they can be proud of” (p. 105).

Hewlett explains that leaders can also help people feel positive about the company by doing things like increasing corporate donations, providing opportunities for community service, and committing to corporate social responsibility programs.

Finally, leadership can “reinvent the business model and point the way forward” (p. 110). Use hard times to re-think and re-invent how you are going to do what you need to do. Use new, creative ideas as “engagement and acceleration” at your company.

PUT ON YOUR OWN OXYGEN MASK

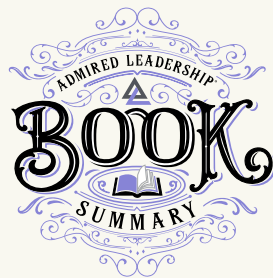
In times of turmoil, the pressure is high on leaders as they handle their own challenges and also look after others. Hewlett says, “everything you’re doing to hold on to your best people, you should also do for yourself” (p. 115).

Stress and long hours can have negative effects on your health and home life. But unless you manage it well, you will be too distracted and exhausted to handle things in both arenas. Know yourself. Be aware of the negative ways you handle stress and seek to “correct negative behavior” (p. 116).

Some things that can help you stay balanced in times of stress are exercise, helping others and volunteering, maintaining or creating “strong personal and professional networks,” and gathering together your own personal “board of directors” to help as a sounding board and provide insight.

Take time for yourself to “tend body and soul and gain fresh perspectives” (p. 123).

Hewlett, S.A. (2009). **Top Talent**: Keeping Performance Up When Business Is Down. Boston: Harvard Business Press.



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The Latest and Greatest Books for Leaders

We work hard to stay abreast of the current writings on leadership, especially those books our clients are reading or have been recommended to read. As a benefit to our clients and to facilitate our own learning, the Admired Leadership team has long maintained a tradition of summarizing the newest books of interest to leaders. Better to read a summary for eight minutes before investing eight hours in the entire book.

After reading a good summary, we believe leaders are able to make better choices as to what to ignore, what to peruse and what to make the time to read closely.