

The Power of Hope in the Workplace

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After the CEO Confidence Survey fell to a record low score of 24 in the fourth quarter of 2008, it moved up slightly in the first quarter of 2009 to a score of 30, indicating greater CEO optimism about short-term economic prospects. Produced by the Conference Board, the survey is based on input from 100 CEOs from a variety of industries; a score greater than 50 reflects more positive than negative responses.

As the CEO survey indicates, CEOs must be pragmatic in their assessment of future economic opportunities. Yet leaders should also remember their rightful role as purveyors of hope in their organizations. Hope is not a plan, yet expectations can be powerful predictors of eventual outcomes, and hope is often a powerful active ingredient in the future success of an organization or individual.

The impact of hope is widely documented in science. For example, in pharmacology, the so-called placebo effect is so widely acknowledged that the Food and Drug Administration requires that clinical studies of drugs must control for it. Similarly, studies have shown that patients receive a healthful benefit simply by going to the doctor, or even by making an appointment to do so.

Applied to the workplace, these findings indicate the degree to which individuals seek to believe that something better will happen – i.e., they are hopeful – particularly during difficult circumstances. When companies are confronted with challenging economic circumstances, leaders often need to help their employees re-interpret (or interpret) these challenges to put them into a better and more hopeful context.

Beyond Goal-Setting Thinking

In organizations, we're accustomed to think in terms of goals: business goals, department goals, individual goals, etc. However, the reality is that while we're adept at setting goals for ourselves and others, believing that we can achieve them can be another matter. Goal-setting is invaluable, but cannot take into account the inevitable obstacles that happen in the workplace each day, preventing or delaying goals from being achieved. Often, the probability of achieving goals rests with hope, and hope is a thought process, not an emotion. There are two kinds of thoughts related to hope and thinking about the future: pathways thinking and agency thinking.

When we have no hope, we are stuck and can't see a way to the goal. Pathways thinking is the ability to "see" and create pathways or strategies to get from point A (a goal) to point B (goal-based results). Agency thinking is the belief that you can personally navigate that path and actually achieve the goal. In short, hope is being able to imagine a path to a goal and believing that you have the ability (agency) to get to it.

Pathways and agency thinking work together, and many people are naturally attuned to using them – particularly those who are optimistic. Generally speaking, when hopeful people bump into an obstacle, they think of a way (or often, many ways) to work around it. In contrast, when less hopeful people hit a setback, they often get stuck and frustrated. Left unchecked at work, non-hopeful thinking can quickly spiral downward and cause individuals or whole teams to lose faith.

Leaders can help their employees with pathways and agency thinking by going beyond simply stating the goals and instead painting a picture of how to achieve them. It also helps for leaders to mention how they plan to work collaboratively with employees toward a common good to achieve organizational goals.

That's the approach taken by the CEO of a prominent Fortune 500 firm, when he recently announced that his company was reducing its quarterly dividend by an unprecedented 88 percent. In announcing this major news to his company's top 200 leaders, this leader also carefully detailed his rationale for the decision and described his personal struggle with making it, but also painted a verbal picture of how it would ultimately help the company and its employees improve financially.

Ultimately, the CEO's candid talk was well-received by employees, who realized the severity of the financial cuts and appreciated their leader's candor, yet also felt emboldened by his pragmatic and hopeful explanation.

Grounded in Reality

As this CEO's example indicates, it's important that a leader's message of hope also be grounded in reality and concrete action. Otherwise, any talk of "hope" at work might readily be dismissed as Pollyanna-ish.

Properly applied at work, there's no denying the potential of hope. Organizational research is increasingly showing hope's power in talent management – as a means to sustain innovation during major changes; as a way to increase profits, employee retention rates, job satisfaction, commitment and performance; and even as a tool to enhance leadership performance.

Given the tightness of discretionary business budgets, perhaps the most practical reason for leaders to promote greater hope in the workplace is the fact that it can be shared with other employees at little to no additional cost. In fact, considering its potentially positive impact, hope might be a leader's most rewarding gift of all.