



***BUSINESS
UNUSUAL:***

***A Time To
Manage With
Compassion***

By Beverly Kaye, Kenneth M. Boxer, and Helen McNeal

Compassion, while always an admirable trait in managers, was never a fundamental requirement for the job.

It is now.

That message came through loud and clear when, in October 2001, we sponsored a “Business Unusual” forum for organizations in the Washington, D.C. area.

September 11 and its aftermath have combined with a faltering economy to make today’s work environment unusually stressful. Many employees are re-examining

long-held beliefs, including the relative priority of work.

Executive Summary

Such questioning is a natural reaction to deeply disturbing events. Managers must respond with compassion. The times demand that organizations interact with employees in ways that go beyond the old accepted routines of business.

Organizations and managers who fail to do so risk losing talent – either in the form of people leaving the organization, or through a loss of focus and commitment among those who stay.

This paper offers insights gleaned from our October session and suggests specific strategies that individual managers and organizations can apply to effectively support and engage employees in these most unusual of times.

We encourage you to share this article with anyone you think might benefit from it.

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Living In The After

How should we manage people in the emotionally charged atmosphere following September 11?

No one has *the* “roadmap”; however, we have ideas. And we imagined others would have ideas, as well. So we organized “Business Unusual,” an open forum for learning and sharing, at

the Capital Hilton in Washington, D.C. About twenty training, HR, and line managers joined us from a mix of defense and civilian federal agencies, non-profit organizations and businesses.

“Yes, life will go back to normal; it always does. But now there is a before and an after. Nothing will be the same.”

*Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate,
in Parade magazine, October 28, 2001*

To begin, we asked our guests to share some of what transpired in their workplaces after the terrorist attacks. Listening to their stories, it was easy to see that while each employee’s emotional response to these changes might be unique, for all employees, the actions of *managers* will largely determine whether those changes will significantly distance employees from their work.

One line manager said: “On September 11, I phoned into work and found that my assistant was still there. I asked her, ‘Don’t you think your children might need you right now?’ She said, ‘Yes.’ So I said, ‘Why haven’t you gone home, then?’ She said, ‘Because no one said I could.’” The manager shook her head at the memory. “Our people didn’t feel empowered to make their families the priority.”

A civilian who works for the US military reported, sadly and with some anger, “Our officers have been very focused on the mission, not the people.” She paused a moment before continuing. “After we heard that the Pentagon had been hit, no one told us if we should stay where we were or evacuate. Our safety was definitely in question. Yet no one seemed to be concerned about *us*.”

In contrast, a local retirement community organized a luncheon for its employees a few days after September 11. “People were invited to talk about the effects of the attacks on them personally, and to voice any worries they had,” said a manager who was there. “That didn’t make anyone’s problems go away, but it helped to be together and to talk about all we were feeling. The company did what it could.”

Given the utter surprise and shock most everyone felt on September 11, it is perhaps understandable that some managers fell short in the eyes of their people. Now the surprise is over. We are living in the “after,” where managers must be prepared to meet employee needs few imagined in the “before.”

Life-Changing Questions

The people of America are coping with a profound loss – the loss of our sense of security and of our capacity to control our own destinies.

The events starting on September 11th provided brutally convincing evidence that any one of us might have our lives taken, at any time, not because we did something wild or foolhardy, but because we showed up for work, opened our mail, drove across a bridge, or boarded a plane.

Such a realization can lead people to view their lives in a whole new light. At the very least, it subjects them to stressful emotions.

In her now-famous book, *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages people often pass through when responding to a

“Some have been so moved by the tragedy that they’re grappling with fundamental questions about their priorities – rethinking career paths, cutting back on grueling schedules, or deciding to pursue work that might pay less but seem more meaningful.”

USA Today, October 4, 2001



profound loss: *Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression* and *Acceptance*. Chances are you've felt yourself experiencing such a range of emotions. Perhaps you've also observed these emotions in others.

What did you feel when you first saw the video footage of jetliners crashing into skyscrapers? We felt disbelief. Such a thing simply could not be happening. The images were so shocking, our subconscious tried to render them as cinematic special effects. Yet the fact is, we were watching real people die.

Those people were distinguishable from ourselves only in their work address. They were not soldiers at war, criminals, or political provocateurs. They'd done nothing to bring violence upon themselves. Anger naturally followed.

Americans' current patriotic fervor could be interpreted as a form of bargaining. We've always loved our country. Now, part of what we loved about it, our sense of safety and security, has been taken from us. Perhaps if we become more demonstrative patriots, if we express our love of

America even more than we did before, we can regain some of what we lost.

The reality of living and working under the threat of further terrorism and its economic consequences is already eroding some people's spirits. Even upbeat individuals may find that they have less energy and less interest in things that engaged them in the past...including work. These are signs of depression.

Managers must be aware that their employees are likely passing through some form of this emotional gauntlet and make appropriate allowances. Better yet, managers can help their people work through anger, bargaining and even mild forms of depression to achieve the healthy and sustainable state of acceptance. They can help by managing with compassion.

“The aftermath of the terrorist attacks posed an acid test for employers, often fundamentally changing the employer-employee relationship. The mass emotions aroused by the tragedy were so primal – fear, grief, anger and the drive to protect loved ones – that any managerial missteps took on larger-than-life importance.”

The Wall Street Journal, October 17, 2001

Managing With Compassion

So how does one manage with compassion?

At the October 2001 session, we presented a set of 26 specific strategies for managing with compassion, to support and re-engage talent. Each strategy is

keyed to a letter of the alphabet, A-Z, and reflects the employee retention and engagement work of one of this paper's authors, Beverly Kaye, developed with Sharon Jordan-Evans. We then asked the group which of those strategies they believe are especially vital for managers to apply now.

The group chose eight letters from the list:

B (Buck) It stops with you. It's your job to support your people. If you notice that all's not well... offer your help. Ask how you can support

them during these tough times. Some will be stoic. Others tearful. Others will act macho or make jokes. Respect their individuality. If you see that someone is hurting... headaches, tiredness, inability to concentrate, irritability... don't just ignore it. Talk to them about what you're noticing. And have a long list of resources handy, including: grief counselors, Employee Assistance Programs, support groups, stress management courses, exercise classes, yoga.

F (Family) Ask about employees' families. Some may want to take their children to school for a while. Others may feel the need to leave early to help care for a family member or support their children's after-school interests. A spouse may have lost employment. A son or daughter may go to war. What has changed at home

com·pas·sion
the humane quality of
understanding the
suffering of others and
wanting to do
something about it

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for your employees? How can you support them in making critical adjustments?

G (Goals) Discuss your employees' short and long-term career needs. Many are re-thinking careers. Some very talented people may be lost if you're not in tune with where they may now want to take their careers. Offer to brainstorm alternative possibilities.

J (Jerk) Don't be one and don't tolerate them. With emotions more open and vulnerable, bad behavior that could have been shrugged off with "that's just the way he or she is" can no longer fly. Have zero tolerance for jerk-like behaviors among managers who report to you, and sincerely ask yourself if you are also in small, or large part, guilty of any of those behaviors.

K (Kicks) Don't forget the benefits of having some fun – even in the midst of sadness and uncertainty. Ask your team what they might want to do to relax, take a break or enjoy themselves. Do they want to go to a movie together, order pizza in for lunch or play some softball? Maybe so, maybe not. Some won't want to plan fun activities, but will want you to let it happen spontaneously.

N (Numbers) If you need to cut costs, use headcount reduction only as a last resort. Remember, the day will come when you must again recruit talent. Job candidates are now paying more attention than ever to how you treat employees when the going gets tough.

P (Passion) Help your people pursue their passions – whatever it is that makes them feel they're getting a lot out of life. When appropriate, explore with them how they might channel those passions in their everyday work.

Q (Question) Embrace exception to the rules. Winter rules is a common phrase in the game of golf. It refers to temporary ways of playing the game during uncommon, often inhospitable conditions (soggy greens, large puddles). Organizations that thrive during dramatic change create their own winter rules. How might you do that with your people? Can you adjust the objectives this month? Allow casual dress? If ever there was a time to bend the rules, it's now.

The eight strategies selected by the group in our "Business Unusual" forum are a fine place to start, but we firmly believe each manager should shape his or her own approach for managing with compassion. To help, we're offering free copies of an article, ***Business Unusual: 26 Ways to Engage Your Talent***, downloadable at <http://www.careersystemsintl.com/> or www.spisolutions.com.

Organizational Strategies

Managing with compassion requires effective action not only by individual managers, but at the organizational level as well. Here are some suggested organizational strategies for engaging employees during business unusual.

Clarify your organization's "zone of focus." So much in the world suddenly seems so much less certain. You can't change that. But you can offer employees more certainty with regard to your organization's future direction. Business unusual is the perfect time to re-examine your vision, mission, values, and critical success factors.

Remember to "stick to the knitting" by identifying the real competitive advantage for your organization.

"Several companies found themselves pilloried in the news media for simply following established policies – for example, requiring employees to account for time off taken September 11."

The Wall Street Journal, October 17, 2001

Provide opportunities for your employees to re-gain a sense of control. Individuals are feeling they have little control over what happens in the world. You can give them more control over their daily work. Offer them fresh opportunities to streamline core processes and participate on task forces. Similarly, support employees who want to get involved in volunteer work or to otherwise "make a difference."

Create opportunities for people to express feelings or concerns and connect. One key message from our "Business Unusual" forum was that people need opportunities to share their feelings, concerns, and changed

circumstances, and gain support from others. These needs can be met through a variety of approaches, including mentoring programs, facilitated group discussions, and one-on-one coaching. Provide the specific kinds of support your people need. Demonstrate through actions as well as words that your organization is concerned about people's well-being.

Keep informed about changing dynamics within your organization. Collect data to determine what are the current key drivers and restrainers in your organization. Prioritize the list, communicate the key issues to employees and then sponsor efforts to address the most pressing issues. Just as important, find out why employees are staying with or leaving your organization. This will help prevent key personnel losses and enhance recruiting efforts.

Provide systematic support for diversity. This is no time for anyone in your organization to feel isolated by who they are. Recognize that honoring diversity is not just a single workshop or a poster on the walls. Some questions for organizations to answer include: Do your senior leaders serve as role models for dealing with a diverse workforce? How do your policies and procedures support diversity? What skill-building tools do you offer? How can you reinforce the importance of diversity?

Give managers the skills they need to manage with compassion. Many managers lack the requisite communication, coaching, and performance management skills. Organizations should now take a fresh look at core competencies for managers, then provide developmental solutions that effectively build the skills managers need in a fast-changing work environment.

Next Steps

Are you ready to shape your own strategy for managing people during this time of business unusual? Visit our web sites, email us, or call us for assistance.

We look forward to helping you.

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