

Directions

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This article appeared in our March 2009 email newsletter. *We welcome your comments on any of our articles. Send an email to info@ecdavis.com.*

It was very good advice for me (... and it might be good for you, too!)

by Ellen C. Davis

For all the good articles “out there” on managing during a downturn, I haven’t seen one that has spoken to me *personally* any better than a very short article in Harvard Business Review from last December. Perhaps you saw it? “Give me the Ball” was a blog response by Tamara Erickson to an HBR inquiry of a group of readers to provide “Unconventional Wisdom in a Downturn.”

Here’s a quote: “What leaders frequently forget in the heat of a crisis is ... instead of hogging the ball, they ought to tap the ideas and energy of the entire organization.” Good advice for leaders at every level and size of organization! Yet, what do most of us do? We hunker down, feel the weight of the world on our shoulders, and proceed to try to take care of everything – and everybody – pretty much on our own.

As the author of this little article suggests, it might be far better to open up even more than we would during “normal” times. The author proposes:

“Ask great questions.”

“Build trust across the organization.”

“Challenge the status quo.”

Twenty five years ago I was on the leadership team of a plant that was ultimately closed during the 1983 economic downturn. In the months leading up to the decision to close, the leadership team thought we were communicating with everyone in the plant – and we were pretty good at informing, at telling others what was going on. But we were lousy at engaging them or asking for their help and ideas. And we certainly didn’t lean on them for personal support – after all, we thought we were there to hold everyone else up! One day in the midst of the crisis, my Training Department team of Cindy and Jim asked me to go to supper with them. Over dinner they reminded me that we were a team, and that they really could lend a hand in many ways, if only I would let them in. It was a wake up call I still remember well.

No, it didn’t change the outcome – the plant was still closed some months later. And, certainly, there were still confidential matters I could not disclose to them. But it changed me and my approach to that crisis. We got back to having regular team meetings; we refocused our work so they could *help* with some of the crisis activities. They felt better – not worse – for being engaged, even though the situation was dire and now they were even better informed about that. As for me – I had our team back – good, creative work got done and things were much more bearable personally.

So, if you too find yourself tempted to “take the ball” by yourself during this crisis period, please think again.

To read the HBR article in its entirety: “Give me the Ball” by Tamara J. Erickson, Harvard Business Review, December 2008, pp. 30 – 31.