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How to Be a ‘Chief Motivating Officer’ in Troubled Times by SHRM Online Staff

As workforces around the globe reel from severe job cuts across their companies—across entire industries—layoff survivors can’t help but wonder whether they will be next. In such rocky times, business leaders more than ever need to become “chief motivating officers” for their companies, according to Suzanne Bates, author of the newly published book, *Motivate Like a CEO: Communicate Your Strategic Vision and Inspire People to Act!*

“Business leaders must inspire employees who remain after layoffs to find their own, individual purposes in their work—beyond just keeping their jobs, and earning a paycheck,” said Bates, president and CEO of Bates Communications. “However, before leaders can motivate others, they need to discover their own purposes, and be inspired themselves, so they can communicate their mission to employees in a clear and powerful way, and connect them to the same purpose,” added Bates.

According to *Motivate Like a CEO*, the following are essential actions for chief motivating officers:

- Formulate a personal vision and purpose for yourself and your organization.
- Become passionate about it so that you can inspire others and bring them on board.
- Share your excitement and clearly communicate it to all employees.
- Encourage employees to find their own, individual purposes in performing their jobs.
- Help employees see how they can make a difference in their daily work lives.
- Work together with employees at all levels so that organizational and individual goals are complementary and can be realized readily.

“To motivate like a CEO is to be driven by your own powerful sense of purpose and passion, and to connect other people to that purpose in a way that inspires them to act,” said Bates.

In a typical workplace, only 29 percent of employees are actively engaged in their jobs, while 71 percent are disengaged—either not engaged at all (54 percent) or are actively disengaged (17 percent), according to the most recent Gallup Management Journal’s Employee Engagement Index. (Gallup’s definitions are as follows: Engaged—“Employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward.” Not engaged—“Employees are essentially ‘checked out.’ They’re sleepwalking through their workday, putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work.” Actively disengaged: “Employees aren’t just unhappy at work; they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged co-workers accomplish.”)

“Employees’ level of engagement in a workforce that has been downsized most likely is lower,” said Bates. “This raises the necessity for business leaders to find their own purpose (a cutting-edge vision for their organizations that they are passionate about)—and then clearly communicate it; ignite the workforce of talent in their organizations around that purpose; and motivate everyone to work together to make it happen.”

Companies that have downsized—particularly those that have eliminated a lot of jobs, closed businesses, and undergone restructurings and reorganizations—may have a different purpose

and mission than before. “If so, the new purpose must be forcefully communicated and shared so that it is well-known throughout the organization,” Bates added.

In addition, chief motivating officers need to help others find their own, individual purposes—missions that employees consider personally fulfilling and rewarding, and that will get layoff “survivors” back into their jobs and acting as team members.

“People want to make a difference,” Bates said. “They want their leaders to provide a context for their work, and a purpose for their everyday contributions. When employees are engaged in activities that they believe make a difference, it motivates them and stimulates their passion and creativity. So, chief motivating officers must inspire people and enable them to connect with their own sense of purpose.”

However, Bates noted, helping people determine their own purposes is an element that’s usually missing from a normal business environment, and it occurs even less frequently in companies that have made significant reductions to their workforces. “There is far too much focus in downsized workforces on short-term goals and objectives that will ‘fix’ the financial numbers,” she said. “This often comes from the top of the organization down, with not enough regard for how each employee fits into the picture.”

Bates observed that helping layoff survivors find their own purposes is a way of demonstrating interest in their careers and of fostering teamwork.

One of the biggest reasons that executives don’t focus more of their time and energy on communicating their purpose—and motivating others to find their own purposes—is that they feel they are too busy. “Business leaders can’t be too busy ‘doing’ to lead,” said Bates. “Employees know what is needed from a leader and will commonly express dissatisfaction when something is missing. As a leader, you must believe in your heart that the people who work with you are truly in it for something bigger than themselves. Then you must be able to communicate in a way that respects their desire to make a difference,” she added.

Bates cautioned that if leaders don’t find time to communicate a big, inspiring message—one that reconnects workers to a shared purpose and to their individual purposes—they risk failing. She noted that finding an inspiring message is more challenging, but especially necessary, for downsized workforces in which each individual carries a larger share of the overall workload.

“One of the biggest principles of motivating like a CEO is praise, reward and recognition,” said Bates. “In a typical workplace environment, this usually doesn’t occur often enough—and needs to become a top priority in a post-layoff workplace.”