

# BEST PRACTICES *in HR*™

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## Keys to Unlock Employee Engagement In Troubled Times

Employee engagement is an ongoing issue for employers, but with rising stress and anxiety levels caused by the current economic conditions, engagement becomes an even bigger challenge.

### Why Employees Aren't Engaged

"In tough economic times, the anxiety level just gets ratcheted up significantly" among employees, says Jim Haudan, author of *THE ART OF ENGAGEMENT: Bridging the Gap Between People and Possibilities* (McGraw Hill, 2008). "... Survival instincts just take over. They play it safe. They hunker down."

Haudan, CEO of Root Learning, Inc. ([www.rootlearning.com](http://www.rootlearning.com)), says business leaders need to "bridge the gap between scared employees and apprehensive

management" and recognize that open communication is particularly important during tough economic times. "People are unbelievably resilient if they are absolutely in touch with reality."

He identifies five reasons employees may *not* be engaged:

#### 1. A feeling of being overwhelmed.

"When leaders tell employees that everything is important, nothing sticks or really matters," he says. "While simplicity is not easy, it is essential to engagement."

2. **Fear.** "When employees don't feel safe, fear drives actions and interactions," Haudan explains. "Fear holds employees back from performing at

*(continued on page 2)*

## Economy Forces Some Companies To Scale Back on Holiday Parties

Tough economic times are putting a damper on some companies' holiday party plans. In fact, 52% of event planners in a recent survey reported that holiday events will be scaled back this season, and 7% will cancel their parties altogether. However, a limited budget doesn't have to prevent employers from hosting a successful event.

### More Creativity Required

"Professional event planners are in the business of pulling off great events that meet corporate objectives and stay within budgets, but the current climate is forcing them to stretch the envelope a bit," says Jim Alkon, group publisher of Agenda USA ([www.agendaonline.com](http://www.agendaonline.com)), producers of resource directories, an online venues-research tool, and live

events for special-event and corporate-meeting planners. "Lower spending levels and restrictive marching orders are forcing them to be more creative than ever."

According to Agenda's survey, 48% of corporate event planners said their holiday party budgets have been reduced, including 18% who expect deep cuts.

The most common cost-cutting measures being implemented or considered include a more cost-sensitive menu (48%), less lavish décor (32%), and a less expensive venue (29%).

"I think companies really have to work with their meeting and event planner and be very sensitive to the image they want

*(continued on page 2)*

## Engagement (continued from page 1)

the level they are capable of. When afraid, they are guarded, cautious, and restrained and do everything possible to regain a feeling of security.”

- 3. Inability to see the big picture.** “When actions are not connected to one another, where the ‘you are here’ sign doesn’t include an arrow, and where the linkage of the routes and roads to a final destination doesn’t exist, employees no longer see the consequences of their actions,” he says. “They lose the intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole and give up altogether.”
- 4. Ownership.** “When employees are invited to critically examine the business, they set in motion the

thinking that allows ownership,” he adds.

- 5. Unrealistic leadership.** “Leaders and employees must have the ability and willingness to visualize reality and act upon it,” Haudan says.

### What to Do

So what can employers do to engage employees—particularly during tough economic times?

Acknowledge employees’ anxiety and stress; recognize that such feelings are “natural, real, and normal,” and help them see the big picture, according to Haudan. “Context is more important than ever.”

Employees need to know how the company is doing and how they can help it succeed. Without that open communication, it’s as though you’re expecting people to watch a sporting

event without revealing the score to them until the end, Haudan says. “How many people will stay actively involved in it?”

It is also important for management to eliminate unnecessary tasks, so employees are able to focus on projects and processes that will help drive business success, he says.

Haudan says some leaders have “unrealistic expectations” in that they believe employees are “capable of doing their job but not of understanding the complexities of the business.” Some leaders do not understand why strategies created by management and dictated to employees don’t succeed. He says engagement depends on getting employees involved in the process, asking critical questions, and offering their insight into how to carry out strategies.

## Economy (continued from page 1)

to convey” internally and externally, Alkon says. For example, an employer that laid-off 5% of its workforce 2 weeks before throwing a lavish party will send a message that “something is out of whack,” he says.

### Stretch the Party Budget

“Take a look at all line items and costs,” Alkon says. As surveyed companies have done, consider scaling back on the menu, décor, and venue. He also offers the following advice:

- **Reach out to employees.** If hosting a holiday party will be a struggle for your company this year, send out an employee survey explaining that you’re contemplating a party and asking how important the annual gathering is to them and how they would feel if you didn’t have a party. Employees might support a decision to cancel a holiday party if it means saving jobs, he says.

- **Understand the benefits.** Keep in mind that a free meal for employees is not the only benefit of a holiday party. A party also provides an opportunity for employees from the same department to bond and for employees from different departments to meet, which can help boost productivity.

Don’t worry about having to skimp a bit on location or food choices, Alkon says. “Putting people in a situation where they can network and reach out to people is more important than what you’re putting in their mouth.”

- **Identify your goal.** If you decide to proceed with a party, “try to make sure you know why you’re doing this and whether you accomplish it,” Alkon says.

Surveying employees before and after a holiday party will help you determine whether you attained the intended goal.

- **Wait for better rates.** He says some corporate event planners are scheduling company parties for January, when rates are much more competitive.

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