

## TOUGH TIMES TACTICS

By Sam W Stearman

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*"These are the times that try men's souls."*

Thomas Paine, December 23, 1776

While times may be different, I think his reference is as fitting to the current economic recession — which promises to be long and cut deep — as it was to America's fight for independence over 230 years ago. While most companies react to their eroding markets by retrenching operations, curtailing growth and wringing their hands in despair — tough times also present unique opportunities for companies brave enough to go against the flow and follow their own paths.

In this and future issues, I would like to share some of the lessons I have learned in my 40+ years in business — both from success I shared with co-workers and from the valuable experience gained through failure.

The first lesson I call:

### **THE ENEMIES ARE OUTSIDE THE GATE**

If they are not, you have big problems. As an employer, it is imperative that you attract loyal hard-working employees, and provide proper guidance, training and communication to assure that everyone fully understands that the competition is the enemy. Internal barriers to higher productivity and morale need to be torn down, not reinforced. If you don't have a workforce you can believe in and can trust to go to the wall for you and then some, you'd better look carefully at your approach, because it is working to your detriment.

In my career, I have worked in many different situations: from small, highly educated professional organizations to those involving large union workforces, and almost everything in between. In every situation, I have found that a positive communicative approach brings out the best in the workforce. Here is my short course on identifying the real enemies and coordinating a winning battle plan.

While these approaches are recommended in good and bad times, they are especially useful when times are bad, as they are now.

- **Develop a firm objective.** Communicate it throughout the organization and assign specific responsibilities at every level of employment.
- **Choose supervisors and managers carefully.** Too often, the best technicians are promoted as a reward for their hard work to the detriment of the employee and the company. Strong people skills, loyalty and teamwork are the traits you need at every level of management, especially front-line supervision.

- **Formalize your personnel policies.** Word your policies from a positive perspective. Explain the reasons for rules and regulations. Don't get caught up in negativism.
- **Treat your employees fairly.** Carefully review your benefit program and get the most for your money. Develop innovative approaches to turn weaknesses into strengths and to reward hard work.
- **Communicate.** Develop a team approach. Establish short-term objectives and monitor progress using visuals.
- **Encourage ideas openly.** The person doing the job, if encouraged to share ideas openly, can offer valuable advice as to improvements. Develop a bona fide employee suggestion program.
- **Get in the habit of saying "thank you."** In a hostile work situation, a simple policy of issuing two commendations for every reprimand worked wonders in helping turn the employees around.

If you think your workers are lazy and lack initiative, I can guarantee you that they will not disappoint you. If you believe that every employee is a valuable team member, you will be surprised at the contributions they will make.

Next issue will be **"Let's Make a Deal"**.

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