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Staff will stay if they know where the business is going

Good leadership will help employees and businesses through tough times.

EMployees will tighten their belts to help a business through tough times if their employers are authentic leaders.

That's according to Naomi Simson, chief executive of Australasian gift business Red Balloon, who says workers are prepared to make cutbacks if they know where they are going and why. "If we see the leader of an organisation getting a brand new car and being all very flashy, well then, why is the employee being asked to cut back?" she says.

Ms Simson recommends employers instead ask staff to suggest possibilities.

"If you tell somebody, 'no more Tim Tams in the kitchen', they're going to go, 'gee, they're getting tough and tight'.

"But if you go to them and say 'What could we cut out of our budget? We want to conserve X amount, where could it come from?' they're likely to come back and say 'I wanted to go on a diet anyway, so you can cut the Tim Tams'.

"It's how you approach the whole thing and leadership is very important, authentic leadership and letting people understand where the business truly is.

"You want to be able to trust and believe in your leadership – that they know where they're going and that

you're going to sign up to that programme." Ms Simson gives the example of Apple founder Steve Jobs, who she used to work for.

"Steve Jobs clearly has a sense of purpose. The whole organisation has an unbelievable sense of purpose, but you know he's not necessarily that affable and easy to get along with.

"He's very committed to his purpose and everyone has an unbelievable respect for the man."

It's this combination of good leadership and management that will give employers the greatest access to morale and employee engagement, Ms Simson says.

"We want someone we believe in.

"We want an organisation that we can trust and we want somebody that we can count on, and we also want people to nurture us along as part of that journey."

Creating that real sense of employee engagement occurs in three stages though.

The first, or logical, connection to the organisation requires employers to deliver on the "table stakes", or basic employment conditions, they promise – salary, health and safety, performance plans and training and development.

The next level is an emotional connection, meaning employees believe in the organisation and trust the people leading it, which is where authenticity is vital.

"That's the thing that will keep people long-term – 'I believe in this organisation, I believe in its products and I believe in its leadership'," says Ms Simson.

If the logical and emotional connections are present they are more likely to also get "brand

connection", which motivates employees to tell the world what a great place their organisation is to work at, and what a fabulous brand it is.

"You can't ask people to do that authentically. You can't ask them to blog or to put Facebook pages up or to Tweet how great it is, but that's what they give back if we get the other pieces right."

Employers who want to create that level of connection and retain their staff no matter what the economic circumstances should ensure they get the first steps right now.

Ms Simson lists five ways to nurture staff in preparation for the upturn, methods she has put in place within her own company. They include:

- Continue to invest in the training and development of staff.
- Continue to invest in technology and innovation and, along with that, take staff on the journey too.
- Continue to invest in recognition of staff.
- Ensure staff are aligned with the company's vision and values, and keep them focused on where you're going.
- Most importantly, continue to have fun at work.

"Do all these things, don't give up on your training, don't give up on investing in people . . . Now's the time to get the logical connection," she says.

"Make sure they know why they're there, and then you will get brand connection, which will take you long into the future, because when people feel they're a part of something they want to stay around."



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