

The soft stuff matters when times are hard

The financial crisis is starting to bite and there's a good chance that many public sector budgets will be hit hard. **Gordon Tinline** looks at how to achieve added value

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The full report *Wellbeing At Work: The New View* can be purchased from the Robertson Cooper website at <http://www.robertsoncooper.com/Pages/Marketing/Wellbeing-Report-Purchase.aspx>

When money is tight it's the “soft stuff” – training, skill development, leadership, succession planning, well-being, engagement – that is seen as a luxury and is often the first to be cut. So will anything be different this time? Will we see the usual patterns of HR budget cuts followed by a period of navel gazing about skills shortages, poor leadership and a lack of talent coming through? Or have things changed? Will the new culture that is emerging in the financial services sector – one where sustainable success and humanistic values will be much more important – trickle down into public sector bodies?

I'd like to explore these questions by referencing some new research published by Robertson Cooper in their recent report *Wellbeing At Work: The New View*, launched at the Business Wellbeing Network's annual conference in October. In the context described above, the research indicates that the one aspect of working life that we cannot afford to ignore is work relationships. If we are to cope with the effects of universal belt-tightening we need to maintain good relationships and reap the benefits of the social support that they bring during what is likely to be a stressful time.

The research summarises trends in staff well-being and engagement across organisations based on a new analysis of an extensive database. The results show that it is not relationships at work that have been the most troubling aspect of working life in the last few years for employees. In fact, a lack of control and influence, inequitable pay and benefits and a lack of resources are all generally more troubling to most people. However, our analysis also shows that while employees may not be consciously reporting that relationships at work are a troubling factor, nothing is more important in terms of predicting levels of staff engagement, psychological wellbeing and, ultimately, productivity.

During prosperous times, when organisational and individual success (or lack of failure, at least) permeates our interactions, people are likely to feel relatively content with their relationships at work. But as times get tougher and the pressure on us all increases, these same relationships may be vulnerable if we take them for granted.

The time is therefore right for organisational leaders, managers and employees to focus on the nature of their key relationships at work. All of these groups have a role to play – organisational leaders must put and keep the issue on the agenda, managers have to strive to create strong teams characterised by good relationships and employees have to be willing to respond. This may cost money and take time, but it will pay handsome dividends should other pressures, such as a lack of

job security and resources, become more acute.

The key relationship for most of us is the one with our line manager – in fact, it is cited by more than a third of people as the main reason for leaving employment. Positive relationships between line managers and team members are based on a balance between challenge and support – underpinned by a sense of purpose. Relationships characterised by critically evaluative or results-orientated challenge feel cold and clinical – interactions often end up being defensive and unconstructive. At the other extreme, relationships that are unerringly supportive and accepting, where conflict and challenge are avoided, feel comfortable but often lack the spark or tension that produces peak performance and genuine employee engagement.

Getting this balance right takes effort and self-development on the part of managers and leaders because most of us have a preference for either a more challenging style or a more supportive one. Truly collaborative relationships, where mutual respect is enhanced by constructive challenge, are extremely valuable. They are also quite rare and don't usually happen by chance – organisations work hard to make this an intrinsic part of their cultures by carefully planned development interventions from top to middle management levels. Should we now stop trying for this source of added value in the face of impending financial constraints? My view is that we should not.

And don't be lulled by the results from your staff survey. If relationships are not highlighted as an issue it doesn't necessarily imply that healthy collaborative relationships abound – because staff have often forgotten what these even look like. It is perfectly possible that employees' expectations regarding workplace relationships are so low that they have stopped worrying about them and resolved to look after “number one”. If this is the case, we may have become complacent about a guaranteed driver of employee engagement and psychological wellbeing.

The new era prompted by the financial crisis will be all about reconsidering what we've got and re-valuing it. Using debt to own excessive amounts of material goods and profiting at all costs are on the wane.

Traditional ideals are likely to become more fashionable again – thrift; growing our own food; caution over risk-taking and, yes, you've guessed it, valuing our relationships with others. We need to be realistic here; when we're busy getting through the working day we can't spend a lot of time reflecting on the value in our relationships. However, to ignore their value and not understand how to protect it, may be dangerously complacent.