

When times are tough we need to get the balance right

We all have a role to play in responding to the current financial crisis and the hardships it may bring, says **Ben Moss**, who warns that a lot depends on maintaining a balanced approach

The new government has spent the past month laying out the austerity measures in store over the next few years. While the future remains uncertain, there does seem to be a new philosophy at the heart of its response to the nation's financial problems.

From my perspective as a business psychologist and managing director of a firm that helps organisations create wellbeing for their workforces, an important theme runs through what will be required in this new political and social reality. That theme is balance.



Of course it's not a completely new idea, but in many respects it has been missing from the economic, business and workplace landscapes of the past decade. David Cameron has claimed that the previous government lost sight of the balance between spending and borrowing; between the relative size of the public and private sectors and between the power it wielded and what our society really wanted from its government. We are set to see both cost and efficiency savings in the

coming months and years; now we have to trust the Cabinet to get the right balance between the two.

Although we don't have much control over how balanced the government's response to the deficit is, where we end up as a nation will also depend on how we respond as individuals and, again, in this respect balance is important. There are various ways in which achieving balance on the ground through people and self-management can support the government's plans:

A balanced response to the measures. There is considerable anger in relation to how and why we got here – that is understandable, but to vent this at those making the difficult decisions to fix the problem is not the answer.

Action has to be taken, so it's important to consider whether there really are viable alternatives and each take responsibility for being part of the solution in the same way as, like it or not, we were part of the problem. If you're not in a managerial position the role you can play may not be obvious – but, as various members of the government have said, "we're all in this together". Even making a conscious effort to avoid contributing to an escalating feeling of national panic is a valuable role we can all play.

Responding with resilience. From the Cabinet through to businesses and the individuals that make up society, the more resilient we are the better we will cope with the future.

The idea of the Big Society is a compelling, if challenging, one. Maybe the first macro quality it has to show is collective resilience on a massive scale. To achieve this we need strong leadership, but in addition it requires us all to

think actively about where our strength to carry on comes from and the role we play in the whole enterprise of getting the country back on its feet.

Getting the pressure/performance balance right. We need resilience because the pressure for public sector organisations and their employees to perform with far fewer resources is on. Managers have to be at the top of their game to get the balance right between applying pressure positively and supporting sufficiently. Don't push hard enough and staff start to relax, press too hard and cases of stress start to appear.

Letting go. Equally important is balancing control and delegation. Driving hard and managing employees' time may occasionally be important with tough targets and reduced resources, but managers can release extra capacity by encouraging autonomy. Clinging to managerial power is almost certainly not sustainable in the current climate and managers may need support to delegate effectively.

There might well be an extra third-of-a-person available in every employee – but this resource is discretionary and has to be actively released – it won't just happen!

Balance absenteeism and presenteeism. It's commonly accepted that absenteeism incurs undesirable costs – indeed, the NHS was famously tasked with saving £555m in this area in the last budget. However, presenteeism – being at work while ill – has been cited as being an even bigger cost. Employers can influence this by how they conceive of and manage absence/presence, but as individuals we also have a responsibility in terms of our mindset and the working cultures we create.

Work-life balance. There is a strong relationship between how employees manage their own work-life balance and the organisation's attendance culture. When we take responsibility for balancing our life in and out of work we play a crucial role in managing our health and maximising our effective working time. Aggregated across a large workforce, this makes a real difference to organisational productivity.

But there are also broader considerations at times like these – work enables us to pay the bills, but when times are tight family and friends (our social support networks) need us to be there too.

So balance is critical for all of us – whether we're talking "bank" or "work-life". Making a conscious effort to manage this area will enable us to cope with the present and to keep going whatever the future holds.

If you want to know more about where your resilience comes from go to www.robertsoncooper.com to access i-resilience – the new free resilience resource from Robertson Cooper.

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