

# Fear and Anxiety at the Water Cooler

## Countering Recession-related Feelings

by **Morrie Shechtman**

The recently proposed \$700-billion bailout of the financial industry brought matters to a head, but the nation's uncertain economy concerned many Americans long before that.

Opinions vary whether America is in a recession. But ask any business leader, and he or she will tell you that *something* is going on. Employees are scared. They're afraid of their companies failing, of being downsized, and of losing their homes and everything they've worked so hard to achieve.

What's more, many people feel like failures. Few people seem to be reaching sales goals and other business targets, and they're even reminded of it in meetings when they are confronted with embarrassing numbers, or given patronizing and hollow "pep talks."

If you suspect that fear (and even shame) is showing up in employees' day-to-day behavior, you're probably right. The following strategies should help:

\* ***Don't try to cajole people out of their anxiety.*** Stop trying to talk people out of their feelings. It won't work. Nobody's going to think their way through this floundering economy, and workers are not going to be logically talked out of their fears or their feelings of failure.

\* ***Get real.*** Openly talk about reality, from the top of the organization down to the bottom. No one needs to be cold-hearted about bad news, but it's better for management to take an, "*It's fear; it's here, get used to it*" approach than to be evasive or dishonest and leave employees out of the communication loop until the pink slips are issued. It's better to be honest and tell people the facts than to allow rumors to run rampant. Employees need to be able to focus on work.

\* ***After you address fear, bring up the other F-word (failure).*** Employees and managers need to engage in discussion about what it means to fail. Does it mean they're worthless? Does it wipe out everything done well? *Or*, does failure signify a missed opportunity and a lesson to be learned? It is crucial to "clear the air" and talk about feelings of having disappointed others, and of being disappointed *in* others.

\* ***Don't assume that all conflict is bad.*** Employees who disagree – even when doing so vehemently – are not the problem. Conflict is actually healthy for a company. After all, there can be no growth without challenge, and no challenge without conflict. It's when employees argue pointlessly, over non-productive issues, and with an edge of hysteria, that they're acting out of fear and conflict doesn't work. Address the cause, and the symptom will resolve itself.

Employees should not be discouraged from speaking their minds. In fact, it's the employees who avoid all confrontation that should be the source of concern. Effective

teams are made up of people who care enough about each other to generate conflict and confront the tough issues. If everyone agrees with co-workers without question what usually happens is the whole team marches down the “rosy” path to self-destruction.

\* ***Live by theory of abundance, not the theory of scarcity – and teach employees to do the same.*** The theory of scarcity holds that there are very limited resources to meet your needs, and you must therefore accept any opportunity that comes your way. However, the theory of abundance says that there are infinite resources, and you can pick and choose opportunities that mesh with your values and that will be beneficial.

You might say, “*But business is scarce right now,*” and that may be true – but only to a point. If you make decisions from a place of desperation – taking on clients that are bad for you, for instance, or cutting prices out of fear – you’ll ultimately cut your own throat. Look at it this way: People still need your services, and they have to get them from someone. Why *not* you? Focus on being the best at what you do, and move forward confidently. You’ll not only keep your customers, you’ll probably gain new ones.

\* ***Help clients conduct a “recession review” of employee skills.*** The EAP can assist by asking key leaders (and their employees) to answer the following question: “*Of all my personal skills that have led to success thus far, which fit the current economic climate and which do not?*” A successful sales manager we worked with has hit the wall in the last six months, along with the salespeople who work for him. His results have been mediocre and getting worse. A portion of this is the economy – but he is aware that a big chunk of the problem lies with him.

This individual is smart, articulate, very professional, and a problem solver. This has produced great results – until now. He is also emotionally distant, difficult to read, and defects attempts to engage him in humor. He has had to develop new skills involving self-disclosure, transparency, and vulnerability. There’s nothing wrong with his previous skills – it’s simply not enough anymore.

\* ***Help employees to find their “familiar.”*** Why is the sales manager in the previous tip so “closed off”? Why are so many business people afraid to take risks? Because, whether they’re effective or not, at least they’re *familiar*. Simply put, a familiar is a feeling or state that we return to repeatedly. It is an emotional pattern that holds tremendous power over our choices, relationships, and careers. A familiar is subconsciously reproduced, sometimes to our benefit, but often to our detriment.

Managers can help employees tremendously by learning about their familiars. You can be sure that when things are stressful – like they are for many people these days – employees’ familiars are asserting themselves in a big way. If enough of them run counter to the skills it takes to overcome tough economic times, management has a major challenge to master.

## **Summary**

Painful as the current economy may be, in some ways it’s the proverbial blessing in disguise. Why? Because it brings employee weaknesses out into the light, where they can be confronted and conquered.

Having been through a number of recessions, what I've learned is that good times and high profits not only hide many sins; they also disguise a profound and damaging lack of personal and professional growth. It sometimes takes a challenging economy to demonstrate that 80% to 90% of what made us successful is *also* the cap on future growth. Remove that cap and the sky is the limit, no matter what the economy looks like.

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