

Wisconsin Park & Recreation Association

Career Center Tips: How to Lead in Challenging Times



Employees are nervous, and rightfully so. The economic crisis and its resulting layoffs, consolidations, and organizational restructuring have people worried and distracted. Motivation is down. Absenteeism is up. Everyone wants to know, "What's going to happen to me?" Rumors are running wild.

In the midst of all this uncertainty and fear, it's your job to help your team (or park and recreation department, or organization) stay engaged and focused on the business at hand. And for that, the "soft skills" of compassion, encouragement, and motivation become crucial. People are looking to you for comfort and reassurance—and, most of all, for leadership by example.

Here are four recommendations to help you lead in challenging times:

Take Care of Yourself

In times of uncertainty, people need leaders who are steady and reliable. You can't be a stabilizing force for others unless you have developed a sense of personal stability. For that, you need to take good care of yourself.

Now is the time to compensate for the demands and pressures of the workplace by developing counterbalancing activities in other areas of your life. Engage in exercise programs and healthful eating habits, cultivate interests outside of the workplace—sports, hobbies, art, music, etc.—that are personally fulfilling, and develop/nurture external sources of emotional support.

Understand that the reasons for disruption may be logical (even inevitable), but your reaction to change is primarily emotional. Being aware of your emotional responses and staying responsive to the emotional reactions of others is a prerequisite for effective leadership in chaotic times. So find a WPRA member to vent with, to be heard, to mourn—and then offer a similar "emotional safety net" to others.

Communicate Like Crazy!

Whenever the situation is ambiguous or uncertain, you can expect the rumor mill to kick into high gear. A lack of formal communication only compounds the problem. Believe me, false rumors are already flying. Don't let the grapevine take over the communication function. You need to be the one to keep your people informed.

Respected aquatic, park and recreation managers are candid communicators who don't ignore or sugarcoat negativity. Instead, they help people make sense of it. The best motivational leaders are those trusted by their team to share knowledge and "tell it like it is." Not everyone will appreciate such honesty, but few will tolerate anything less.

Today, people are looking for honest answers to the following questions:

- Where is the organization heading?
- How secure is my job?
- What will the work priorities be for my area?
- What are the organization's new core competencies?
- What are the new job skills and accountabilities?
- How will we measure success?
- What are the consequences/rewards for the organization and for me?

Get Out of Your Office and Meet with Employees Face to Face

For global organizations, technology has been a wonderful tool for reaching geographically dispersed employees. But when dealing with fear and uncertainty, especially in the park and recreation profession, it is not the time to rely on email or intranets. People need to meet with you face-to-face.

How many times have you heard a park and recreation manager respond with the following statement after a staff meeting: "How many times have we told them about that? Why don't they *know* that?"

Oh, they know it, they just want to hear it from *you*. More importantly, they want to be able to *look* at you when you say it.

Harness the Power of Collaboration

Your park and recreation department's competitiveness is a combination of the potential of its people, the quality of the information that people possess, and a willingness to share knowledge with others. The leadership mandate in challenging times is to link these components as tightly as possible.

But knowledge can only be volunteered. Leaders can't force people to collaborate. It is all a matter of trust:

Trust in Yourself and in the Value of Your Contribution. To be a vital contributor, you must believe that your opinions and insights matter, and that your knowledge and experience (regardless of job title) are valuable to someone else. Unless you trust the innate wisdom and creativity of your ideas, there is little impetus to offer them to others.

Trust between Team Members. Even in good times, people are reluctant to share information with others when they don't know them well enough to evaluate their trustworthiness. Effective teams have learned that the time to get to know one another and to build valuable "social capital" develops the kinds of trusting relationships that pay off in increased collaboration and productivity.

Trust in Leadership. Regardless of the overall department culture, individual park and recreation managers and team leaders can create mini-cultures of trust within their work group or staff. The best of these leaders do so by taking the time and effort necessary to make people feel valued. They emphasize people's strengths while encouraging the sharing of mistakes and lessons learned. They share the credit and the recognition. And, most of all, they encourage and respect everyone's input.

Leadership's Trust in Others. People learn what is important to leadership by the actions they see modeled by those leaders. Too often, employees hear leaders *saying* that knowledge sharing is essential but still regularly withholding information they deem unsuitable or inappropriate for employees. Employees also see leadership giving lip service encouragement to the idea of collaborative input, when what it's really seeking is a rubber stamp for decisions already made.

The most effective managers in challenging times are catalysts, creating synergy in their organizations. They delegate responsibility and authority. They encourage and protect their teams. They model attitudes and behaviors they want to see reflected back. Most of all, they realize that thriving in today's erratic environment takes emotional literacy. It is no longer enough to appeal solely to people's logic. Leaders also have to touch people's hearts. And the best of today's leaders do so by revealing their passion for the future success of the organization and for the individuals in that organization who face the tough job of transforming *themselves* in order to collectively create that future.