Facing tough times? Although difficult circumstances present many business challenges to you, perhaps the greatest challenge is maintaining a positive, even enthusiastic, workplace atmosphere. How? It’s easier than you think. Here are 20 ways you can create a dynamic business atmosphere during good times and bad. Select a few, and build the business environment that will make you and your people proud.

By Rick Ensman

1. Celebrate success. Whether it’s a major sales victory, or simply an administrative accomplishment, take note and smile. Successes, large and small, boost morale.

2. Break tasks into components. When things seem tough, obstacles seem insurmountable. When obstacles loom, separate your tasks into discrete activities with specific timelines. The result: They’ll become more realistic.

3. Ask your people how things are going. They’ll appreciate your interest. More important, they’ll tell you how things are going, and this information may benefit you.

4. Confront rumors. The minute you hear a rumor, squash it. Either admit its truth with the best face possible, or dismiss it clearly and publicly.
Acknowledge uncertainty. When you can’t predict how things will go in the months ahead, say so. The people around you will appreciate your candor.

Offer updates. Keep your people informed. Offer a report at every staff meeting. Post sales and profit statistics on employee bulletin boards.


Train your people. During slow periods, your people may have the time to upgrade their skills. Use the time productively for formal training.

Promote continuous learning. Encourage employees to read, to seek education on their own, to boost skills through self-paced CDs, and to become involved in their own professional organizations.

Foster teamwork. Now is the time to involve the people around you in solving problems. Sound communication, group-based tasks and goals, and employee empowerment can bring newfound commitment to the work at hand.


Seek advice. Identify the people who can offer suggestions, both inside the business and outside. Pose the thorniest of problems to them.

Give advice. Boost your credibility and performance by helping others—employees who want to learn new skills or upgrade their own performance, peers in non-competing companies, association members attending trade meetings or conferences.

Stay clear and direct. A clear, confident communication style helps inspire confidence in others.

Be available. Walk the job site. Let employees see you. Be ready to answer anyone’s questions, anytime.

Seek hidden talents. Look for value-added skills and talents employees can bring to the business. Does your sales clerk have a hidden talent for ad design? Does your receptionist have the ability to handle customer service problems? You may find powerful new skills available, at little or no cost.

Say thanks. When times are tough, nothing beats a small token of appreciation, coffee with the boss, or just a simple ‘thank you.’

Look for feedback. At every chance you get, ask the people around you: How are we doing? What can we do better? New ideas may come to the fore.
Offer leadership opportunities. Encourage your people to assume positions of leadership—such as team chairmen or project managers, for example. The result: greater commitment and more participation in problem solving.

Feel good about yourself. When things are tough, remember your past successes. And remember the vast reservoir of skills you bring to the table each day. Remain forward-looking and optimistic, and share your enthusiasm with the people around you. The goal: long-term business vitality and growth.

About the Author
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You can do many things to build and maintain a positive business atmosphere, whether times are booming or tough. Whatever you do, remember four basic principles:

- **Constantly reinvent your business.** Never sit still. Always seek out new customers and markets, new products, new technology, new ways of doing things.

- **Pay attention to the little things.** Simple courtesies, like notes of appreciation and words of thanks, go a long way toward building an upbeat atmosphere. Remember to pay attention to workplace details, and encourage others to do the same.

- **Display your values.** Trust, respect for others and personal integrity go a long way in today’s world. These sometimes-rare qualities will rally people around you, both inside and outside your business.

- **People are important.** Take note of the personal and occupational needs of your people. Listen to them, encourage them, and praise them for their achievements. Led and managed well, most employees will motivate themselves and repay you with great performance time and time again.