

Fast Lane

Michelle Abreu, co-founder, president and chairwoman, Oxford Consulting Group Inc.

Building confidence

HOW TO INSPIRE YOUR EMPLOYEES TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

BY CAROLYN LAWELL

The ability to inspire confidence in employees is critical, especially in rough economic times, says Michelle Abreu.

"It really pushes people to go far beyond what they thought they could do," says Oxford's president and chairwoman. "Also, as a whole, when you have everybody with that kind of mindset, it really pushes your organization to new heights."

That mentality has helped Abreu — who co-founded the firm in 1998 — grow Oxford to 2007 revenue of \$18 million.

Smart Business spoke with Abreu about how to inspire your employees to achieve their goals.

Q. How do you inspire your employees?

By remaining focused on what your goals are and not waning from that. Not doing things that you wouldn't otherwise do.

We've had certainly a lot more team meetings just to make sure people are calm, that we do have the right fundamentals and our business is solid. That really inspires confidence that they know and trust that we have been doing the right things and we continue to do the right things for the benefit of the company.

There are always ups and downs. You have to expect, as an organization, that you will have down years. Bring people in and brainstorm creative ideas.

A good example of that is, at the end of the year, we had a team meeting to talk about cost-cutting opportunities. We brought everybody together and said, 'OK let's have a contest. Who can come up with the best ideas for the company?'

That really inspires people to give their best, knowing that they're directly impacting the bottom line and can have a real impact beyond just the work that they have to do every day.

I think it's important for leaders to be inspiring, really displaying confidence in everything that you do. Certainly, especially in today's economic

environment, it puts a lot of stress on managers and leaders within the organization, but your employees can see that and your customers can see that. That's not something you want to outwardly display.

Q. How do you display confidence?

Always putting things into perspective is a key piece to that — recognizing that if you display nervousness or a knee-jerk reaction or concern, that will emanate within your organization.

When I look at our organization, I don't just consider that I have a family that I provide for. I am helping and our organization is helping to provide for all of their families, as well. So they're trusting, as the leaders they've chosen to work for, that we are doing everything in their best interest. And frankly, I don't think that coming to work and acting and behaving stressed out and whatnot really helps anybody, it certainly doesn't help them be more productive.

Putting things in perspective is the big piece of that. Make sure that you have the necessary cash reserve and that you're still making sound business judgment. Never appearing to be concerned or afraid of failure and go into everything knowing you're going to be successful and really emanating that throughout the organization. Leading by example and making the im-

possible seem possible.

Q. How do you make the impossible seem possible for your employees?

By giving them examples of ways that can be achieved. Allowing them to see that if it's just me that has the vision or goal for the company, I can't do it by myself.

Through our strategic planning process, we bring everybody together to understand what our three-year process is going to look like. Then, we have pretty detailed plans on how we plan to achieve that, and we share that with everybody.

By showing them a road map, it then becomes reality, and that's something people can believe they can do. It only makes them feel much more enthusiastic about what they bring to the table and how they're going to help get to that goal that you're trying to get to.

The way that we do that is, as a leadership team, we develop the strategic plan every year. It's a rolling strategic plan, a three-year plan. Once it's finalized and our leadership has agreed to it, we then gather all of our employees together.

As a final draft, we ask for input from them. If they have ideas or they think there are some areas where we're lacking or it's not what they expected, we then take that feedback from them and we finalize the plan. Once we have the plan finalized, then we come up at a department level or a major function level with an action plan. The leader of that area will then work within their organization over the course of a month and a half to develop strategic actions, and we assign owners.

If you are very inclusive with your employees, you ask them for their help, you ask them their opinion, you ask them to be very involved in the development of the strategic plan, people are inspired by that.



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HOW TO REACH:
Oxford Consulting Group Inc.,
(614) 310.2700 or
www.oxford-consulting.com