

SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, November 23, 2001

Dealing with anxiety

Here's how you and your staff can lessen the emotional strain

By Jo Hawkins Donovan, for *Small Business Times*

We keep hearing about these “uncertain times.” Of course I always want to ask, “And before this, we were certain about the future?” Be that as it may, things are different. Business owners wear the mantle of leadership, and it weighs heavier now than it did a few months ago. How do we lead in this environment? How is it affecting us?

The business owners I coach are experiencing a higher level of anxiety. Anxiety is a tricky thing with lots of implications. It impairs performance in a wide range of functions important to running a business, i.e. attention, memory, and problem solving.

Psychologists divide anxiety into “state anxiety” which is increased arousal due to environmental factors, and “trait anxiety,” an individual’s characteristic way of reacting to arousal. You probably know plenty of people who exhibit trait anxiety. And everyone you know — who’s awake — is now exhibiting state anxiety.

It affects us in all kinds of ways, even subliminally. Most days I feel like I’m coping well with the various news alerts. But at the end of some of those days I have terrorist nightmares that jerk me awake, wide-eyed. If I hear an unusual noise, I’m out of my chair to investigate. And I’m usually a pretty calm cucumber, even in crisis. All of our thresholds are lowered, for fear, for anger, for dealing with stress of any variety.

As business owners, we are watched carefully by those in our organizations. Our behavior, on a daily basis, shapes the behavior of those people around us. As Albert Bandura, who contributed much to understanding human beings said, “Of the many cues that influence behavior, at any point in time, none is more common than the action of others.”

Warren Bennis said that during unprecedented times, followers need from their leaders three basic qualities: direction, trust and hope. These suggestions may help you give direction, trust and hope to the people who are watching you, looking to you for some steady-

ness in these shaky times.

Check in – Employees’ trust will be heightened if they see you regularly, even for a few minutes. It doesn’t take long for you to find out how each employee is faring during these times, and that will change from day to day. They are very interested in how you are faring as well.

Practice extreme self care: Stress, especially I think, the kind of background stress that we deal with daily since Sept. 11, affects our immune systems. I push for extreme self care with all of my clients, all the time. Now it is even more critical. You know what to do — eat well, moderate empty calories including alcohol, move your body regularly in a mix of aerobic exercise and strength training, rest your mind and body, and drink lots of water (most of us go around dehydrated).

Rule No. 1: Have fun – For you and your colleagues at work, it is important to allow yourself some lightness, belly laughs are even better. Break your rhythm with leisure activities that you enjoy so much you forget what time it is.

Include yourself in cutbacks – The attacks whacked an economy that already had flu symptoms. Many business owners are scratching their heads and sharpening their pencils. If you cut salaries, cut yours as well. If you reduce your executives’ support staffs, reduce yours as well and make these democratic steps known.

Remember what you love about your country and your business – You have values you’d go to the wall for. Hold those even closer to your chest now, they’re comforting.

And — spend lots of time with people who love you.

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