

The Economy, Unions and Prozac

An Interestingly Odd Combination

By Jaime Jusidman

During the last couple of months, I have been researching support groups for people coping with the stresses created by our present economic crisis. I started my research driven by my curiosity and the need to understand the impact that the current economical conditions have on individuals and the mechanisms people are using to cope. There were not a lot of surprises. People were dealing with a wide variety of issues from unemployment, uncertainty of their future, loss of relevance, aging, etc.

One support group that particularly caught my attention was made up of people that were employed with a steady income but still feeling extremely vulnerable and powerless. As I inquired more into their dynamic, I discovered that their lack of emotional wellness was strongly related to their perceived inability or fear to express their feelings and/or grievances at work. This fear seems to come from a collective assumption of negative repercussions if their concerns were expressed to their management. Many are choosing the “certainty of pain” by staying quiet, repressing their emotions and seeking help through medication, individual or group therapy, etc., versus the “pain of uncertainty” generated by the fear of losing their job in this turbulent job market.

With the election of President Obama and a predominantly Democratic Congress, it is expected that labor unions will be more influential in driving employee initiatives. The Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) is a clear example of how this leverage is being used. Mostly opposed by business, Republican Congress and Chambers of Commerce, EFCA has high probabilities of passing with some minor modifications.

You may ask yourself “What do depression support groups have to do with EFCA?” Let me continue...

Unions were created as a way to balance the power between workers and corporate owners and management. Unions were originally created to collectively represent and negotiate for workers in order to achieve fair and equitable treatment in the work environment. Through time and experience this relationship has most often proven to be contentious. Management often sees unions as unnecessary institutions to be avoided, because union leadership can be self-serving, politically driven, and focused on one side of the business equation (labor) with little or no concern for the overall performance of the enterprise. Unions are often obstacles for sound business decision making.



My experience with the depression groups has given me a sense of how fertile the ground is currently for unions to flourish. Management is busy with the financial performance of the organization, dealing with the market challenges, attending to the economical pressures, keeping the business afloat and, if feasible, meeting ROI expectations.



Downsizing, cost reductions, increased workloads, reduced hours and/or increased hours with no increase in pay, cut bonuses, etc. are all sources of unrest. In addition, with unemployment rates at 10%, CNN, NBC, FOX, ABC and most publications mine the crisis to the maximum increasing the level of fear across the board. **With workers/employees feeling increasingly vulnerable, we are beginning to see the start of collective unrest—fertile grounds for union activities.**

EFCA provides the means to bring unions into the workplace easier and faster. Employees under duress, fearful and depressed may find the union proposition and the power of collective representation to be more appealing than Prozac, Celexa, or Cymbalta.

During my 30 years of experience as an Organization Development consultant, I have witnessed over and over again that when economical downturns happen, often senior management cut their budgets in areas that are fundamental to the health of their employees and the health and productivity of their organization, both in the short and long run.

During this period of economic and social unrest, it seems imperative that senior management needs to be particularly attuned to employee concerns and take actions to alleviate those fears and concerns. The starting point is to better understand what your employees are experiencing.

Opinion Surveys, 360° Feedback, Supervisory Training, Management and Executive Coaching, and Team Building, are safe and accessible ways for employees to express their concerns, opinions and desires.

With such employee-based activities as listed above, senior management not only provides activities to strengthen employee and organizational health, they also provide information about employee collective trouble areas. This is valuable information that senior management can use to address broad areas of employee concerns. **Taking management action before collective employee action is best both for the employees and the organization.**