

Energize Employees with Green Strategy

by **Andrew Winston**

In times of high economic stress and layoffs, it can be difficult to maintain employee morale. Greening your business, and involving everyone in the process, can keep people motivated and help your company ride out the storm. They will respond even more enthusiastically if the organization is getting lean and green for the dual purposes of environmental concern and profit. And here's the best part, given the severity of the downturn: Increasing employee excitement and changing behavior can cost very little.

I suggest approaching your people on three levels: First, support their efforts at home. Wal-Mart's Personal Sustainability Project has allowed more than 500,000 workers to make and keep commitments to their planet and to their health by, for example, using less water or biking to work. Second, form "green teams" to harness environmental concern and tackle symbolic eco-waste around the office (for instance, by eliminating plastic water bottles). Third, and most important, encourage workers to move past this base of awareness to focus their energies on the core business. The ultimate goal, especially during a recession, is to improve your company's performance and competitive position through green strategy.

Getting employees excited about new, low-cost ways of operating—or about creating products and services that help customers reduce their environmental impacts—will engender an extremely loyal workforce. Better yet, these newly inspired workers will position your organization for a quicker postrecession recovery. Ray Anderson, the founder of sustainability leader Interface, credits his employees' eco-efficiency efforts in the 1990s with rescuing the flooring company during the last real estate crash (fueled by the dot-com bust). But the sustainability work did more than just slash hundreds of millions of dollars from Interface's cost structure; it also kept people engaged through the economic rough patch. "In my 52 years of business," Anderson says, "I've never seen an issue galvanize people in a company like sustainability."