



Transforming Anxiety *into* **ENERGY**[™]

How to Prevent Panic
and Promote Productivity in Turbulent Times

By Wendy Mack

with contributions from Meredith Kimbell and Myron Radio



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This e-book is a gift for you and all the leaders out there who are looking for ways to lead with authenticity, passion, and transparency in these tough economic times. Please feel free to email this e-book to colleagues, post it on your blog, or link to it. Just don't charge for it!

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The Current State of Anxiety

The National Bureau of Economic Research states that the US has been in a recession since December 2007.

Companies in every industry are struggling to deal with the impact of the country's financial crisis. Executives are looking at ways to cut costs and maintain profits while their customers are simultaneously limiting and sometimes drastically reducing their own spending. The result is a domino effect that is cutting into profits and employment numbers across the board.

National unemployment is at a 14 year high. More than 2.4 million people lost jobs in 2008. A Watson Wyatt Worldwide survey in mid-October showed that 26% of employers were planning layoffs or other reductions in force in the coming 12 months.¹

Feeling anxious? So are your employees.

As individuals, we tend to become anxious when:

- The future is unknown.
- The future is out of our control.
- We, or people we care about, could be hurt.

Given that all three of these circumstances are the reality for most American workers right now, it should come as no surprise that employees are anxious. Unfortunately, too many leaders are doing nothing about this anxiety. Perhaps they feel it's a touchy-feely issue. Perhaps they think morale is not as important as protecting profitability.

It *is* about morale. But too much anxiety also hurts the bottom line.

¹ Business Week, November 2008, p. 30.

The Impact of Anxiety on the Bottom Line

As companies race to deal with the declining economy, employee communication is often neglected. Yet, ignoring employees' concerns can be costly in more ways than one. If not addressed, anxiety impacts the bottom line via reduced productivity.

A September 2008 poll by Workplace Options showed that half of those employees surveyed reported feeling stress over financial matters, with 48 percent saying the current economic uncertainty has caused them to be less productive at work.

In addition, as tales of layoffs, declining revenue, and falling stock prices dominate the media, employees at all levels become fearful. When people are afraid, they stop taking risks. Unfortunately, this behavior is exactly the opposite of what you need in times like these. For your organization to succeed, you need more risk-taking, creativity, and innovation!

As a leader at any level, you can't afford to ignore anxiety!

*"The degree to which employees are concerned about **losing** their jobs varies inversely with the degree to which they are **doing** their jobs."*

- Bill Catlette & Richard Hadden

"When fear takes over, productivity goes down."

- Rick Maurer

The Leader's Role

According to communication strategy consultant Kathy Collura, "There's a lot of noise and panicky bad advice on television and the Internet, but little sound, calm or useful information." Collura and other experts maintain that employers need to fill the void. Your employees are looking to you for assurance and for answers.

Unfortunately, many leaders are reluctant to communicate in times of uncertainty. They may be thinking, "What on earth could I say when I don't even know for certain how the financial situation will impact us or what we will do about it?" The temptation may be to hold off on communicating until we know more.

It seems as though holding off is exactly what a lot of companies are doing. According to the communications firm Weber Shandwick Worldwide, 54% of surveyed employees have not heard from their organization's leaders at all during this crisis and 71% feel that their leadership should be communicating more.

While I agree that leaders should be communicating more, I believe that the role of the leader goes far beyond providing information. Employees need more than data. They need to know what the current situation means for them, for their peers, and for the company as a whole. They need an opportunity to personally contribute. And you need the dedication, passion, and contributions of each person for your company to not only survive but to succeed.

In turbulent times, a leader's most important role is transforming anxiety into energy!

"A common response in trying times is to look to authority figures for help in creating meaning and providing direction."

- Robert E. Quinn

"The job of leaders is to rally people to a better future. They are instigators. Driven by their compulsion for a better future, their challenge is to do everything in their power to get other people to join together to make this future come true."

- Marcus Buckingham

How to Transform Anxiety into Energy

Through interviews, research, and a review of best practices, I've discovered four key elements for transforming anxiety into energy.

1. Build trust all year
2. Communicate openly and honestly in tough times
3. Give employees the tools to COPE
4. Unleash internal and interpersonal energy

It's not about calming people down.

While reducing fear and easing anxiety are important in the midst of a crisis, be careful not to instill a false sense of complacency. While too much anxiety is debilitating, too little anxiety creates passivity. Workplace psychologist Bob Rosen has coined a term for finding the right balance of emotions. He calls this “just enough anxiety.” Rosen's and others' research shows that a moderate level of “performance anxiety” is motivating, animating, and helpful. It heightens our attention and engages our readiness to tackle something challenging.

So, instead of trying to calm people down, focus on transforming negative emotions into positive, energizing emotions such as urgency, hope, and unity.

The following pages will help you learn how.

Step #1: Build Trust All Year

Without a foundation of trust, any attempts to transform anxiety into energy will fail.

Recently, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company held a town hall meeting. His intent was to communicate with his employees about the state of the business. While his intent and much of what he said was laudable, his audience responded with skepticism. Why? The CEO had done and said a number of things over the past year that destroyed trust with his employees.

It is highly unlikely that we will generate commitment from people who don't like and trust us. Consultant and change expert Rick Maurer writes, "When the people you are trying to influence feel that you are using spin, they get suspicious and begin to analyze what it was that you might have meant when you spoke. They no longer accept what you say at face-value."

Trust takes constant communication.

The format of the communication can vary greatly, including methods such as:

- Management by walking around (MBWA)
- Town hall meetings
- Live streaming video to remote locations
- Phone calls and face-to-face meetings
- Blogs
- CEO letters

"Leaders facilitate trust when they are open and honest about what is happening. Trust comes from being visible, and leaders cannot over-communicate during times of trouble. Make yourself available and accessible."

- Gretchen M. Spreitzer

"When you need the relationship – it's too late to build it."

- Lois Frankel
Author and Coach

Step #2: Communicate Openly and Honestly in Tough Times

Eliminate the strain of silence!

In times of uncertainty, rumors in organizations tend to multiply. If left unaddressed, momentum builds and leads to distrust. For employees to trust their management teams, leaders need to communicate openly and honestly about what's happening.

*"When facts are few,
opinions loom large."*

- Karl Jung, Founder of
Analytical Psychology

The C-Level needs to be seen.

As a general rule, I believe that senior leader visibility and accessibility need to increase in proportion to the number of "unknowns" in an organization. Instead of waiting to hold town hall meetings until all of the details have been worked out, it's important to communicate frequently during the time when options are being weighed and decisions are being made. Communication Expert Alison Davis agrees, asserting that employees need more communication when anxiety is on the rise. She argues that executives need to be more visible and more accessible in times like these. The point is not so much about sharing information as it is about building trust.

Acknowledge the bad news.

All too often, leaders attempt to shield employees from bad news. But let's face reality. Your people know that things are tough out there. If you aren't talking to them, they may make false assumptions that fuel the rumor mill and lead to more anxiety. In addition, if you aren't talking to your people, their trust in you will diminish.

Employees don't want the truth to be sugar-coated. Communication expert Robert Holland urges leaders to consider a message such as, "I know the financial crisis has touched each one of you in very personal ways. These are troubling times, but let me tell you what our company is doing to weather the storm."

*"Employees can take bad
news with shocking
resilience . . . What
employees can't take is
being shut out."*

- TJ and Sandar Larkin

Engage employees in personal communication.

Avoid the temptation to rely on emails and blogs and memos when you have to share bad news. Research has shown that face-to-face and voice-to-voice interactions enhance trust and clarity. Yes, when you engage your people in two-way communication they may ask questions that you aren't prepared to answer. That's okay. The fact that you are communicating is more important than having all of the answers at this point.

Listen!

Executive coach Meredith Kimbell writes, "I find that in tough times that listening to questions, concerns, frustrations, ideas and desires is as powerful as having answers. When people feel listened to, they are engaged. Leaders so often want to fix things that they struggle with understanding that simply listening is valuable to people trying to make sense of something they can't yet understand. It is always great to have answers, but it is still powerfully helpful and engaging to talk with people and show you understand their perspective and hopes."

When the executives at Bostik, Inc. decided to cancel a multi-day sales and marketing meeting only a week before it was to take place, they met with the three senior directors of the function to explain their reasoning. The senior directors together decided to personally phone each of the 60 employees who had been scheduled to attend the meeting in order to deliver the news voice-to-voice. These insightful leaders knew that a mass email would have caused rumors to fly. By talking to each person, they were able to prevent panic and explain the business rationale for the cancellation.

Acknowledge the unknowns.

When you don't have the answers, communicate possibilities and probabilities. According to Meredith Kimbell, "Between the news and the rumor mills, there is not much your people haven't heard or guessed. Talk as honestly as possible about what you know and say what you don't or can't know. It will build your credibility and their clarity."

Organizational transitions expert William Bridges agrees. Bridges believes that it's better to say, "I don't know what we will do about X, but I commit to letting you know as soon as I do" than it is to say nothing.

"The reason employees come to distrust their managers is not because managers told them something bad, but because they told them nothing at all."

- TJ and Sandar Larkin

When the home construction market started to decline last fall, the executives at a building supply company developed specific contingency plans for a variety of scenarios. The CFO and other leaders held town hall meetings at which they explained the state of the business and asked employees to begin tightening their belts – "just like they were all doing at home." The CFO went on to explain that if business hit a 20% drop off from last year, the company would stop all overtime and limit hiring. A 30-40% drop would mean asking employees to move to a reduced workweek. When the numbers ultimately came in at 20%, employees were quick to accept the cutbacks.

Don't make promises. Do communicate possibilities and probabilities.

Handling the Tough Questions

Contributed by Meredith Kimbell, Award-winning Executive Coach and co-author of [Create the Business Breakthrough You Want](#)

Brenda contacted me for some coaching advice. Her young team members had only worked during "good times" and were now distracted by frightening questions: Could they count on the bonuses they had worked hard to earn? How secure were their jobs? What if they lost their biggest account?

Brenda admitted she felt angry when team members didn't "naturally" work harder, get more creative and step up when the need was "so obvious." She realized that reacting from her belief that "they should be different" sabotaged the thing she most wanted – to inspire her team. Impatience and blame threatened HER creativity and success. She stopped to examine and accept that their concerns were their "reality." Her expectations became her goals, not her excuse for righteous indignation.

Brenda needed her team to deliver outstanding results, even though she couldn't guarantee them the successes or rewards they were used to in the coming year. What was the best way to handle the tough questions? How could she reassure and focus her team when she had so few answers? As a coach, I shared three pieces of advice that Brenda immediately put to use.

#1: Connect through emotion. Watch non-verbal expressions. These will reveal the emotions embedded in your people's questions. If the feeling is clear, legitimize it, e.g., "It is natural to feel X." (E.g., anxious, worried, pre-occupied or mad." Or "I've heard several people are worried about that question." If you aren't sure of the exact emotion, legitimize their "concern." "Concern" is a general descriptor for difficult emotions that will build the connection you want.

Many of the team's questions (even the ones sounding logical and neutral) included a strong emotion – often fear, urgency, or anger. If Brenda addressed only the rational content of questions, people would leave dissatisfied, saying "she just doesn't get it." Her people needed to feel connected with her if she was to lead them. She learned to simply name the feeling inside the question. When she did, they felt understood, participated more openly, and were more willing to trust her guidance.

#2: Remember that that your mood is contagious. Choose an urgent, constructive, inspiring mood. Start problem solving. Consider what can happen for you, your team, and your business when you deeply, unquestionably accept current reality as the place from which to build the future you want.

#3: Raise hope. Discuss what people most want to feel proud of on the "other side" of this economic downturn. Offer your vision. Tell stories about times your people have overcome big challenges by staying creative, resourceful, resilient, and determined. Reconnect them to the possibility that they can surprise themselves, your competition and clients with the outcomes they can deliver. When you observe rising courage, mutual support, and productive creativity, you've achieved the right blend of honesty and hope.

Brenda could anticipate coming challenges, but was initially afraid to overwhelm her people by talking honestly about them. Instead, she found that "facing the brutal facts" together engaged her people. Knowing facts and exploring scenarios helped them think more clearly. When she also painted pictures of what was possible in the midst of the uncertainties and affirmed their strengths, she threw them a lifeline of hope and a vision worth working for.

Business Impact

The final results aren't in yet, but Brenda sees signs that she is converting her team's fears into curiosity and courage with her straight talk. She's building their ability to handle ambiguity and think more clearly during uncertain times by engaging them in exploring options. As she focuses on their strengths, she sees a growth in their internal confidence. Finally, her team is beginning to act more like partners/owners than subordinates waiting for someone to provide for their future.

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Step #3: Give Employees the Tools to COPE

Up to this point, I have mainly focused on building trust and easing anxiety. While both of these outcomes are critical, in order for your business to flourish you'll also need to increase productivity.

In order to promote productivity, you need to help your employees figure out what to focus on and what actions to take.

In my work, I've found that four powerful feelings help employees move from anxiety to action. These feelings include a sense of:

- Control
- Optimism
- Purpose
- Engagement

"A sense of being overwhelmed stops action instead of encouraging it."

- John Kotter

Control

One of the reasons that the current situation is so frightening to so many people is because it feels as if our economic well-being is out of our control. As human beings, we don't like it when we aren't in control.

Leaders can help employees deal with uncertainty by helping them regain a sense of control. Arbitron Executive Kathie Ross says, "It's up to you as the leader to help people set their worries aside and focus on what they can control, on the progress that they can make."²

Of course, you and your team cannot control the larger economic environment. But you can control how well you treat your customers, as well as your own focus and productivity.

At the same time that you are focusing on helping employees feel a greater sense of control, you and your colleagues on the leadership team must get comfortable with having less control. Taking the attitude that you "know what's best for employees" and attempting to shield employees from bad news increases cynicism and mistrust.

"All of us need to believe that we have at least some control over our future. Powerlessness leads to despair."

- Rick Maurer

While the recent drop in gas prices was good news for many consumers, it had a devastating impact on many people in the oil and natural gas industries. When one Denver-based firm decided to cut back on drilling, the operations manager recognized that employees would take the news as a sign that their jobs were in jeopardy. So he held a meeting with his managers and explained that the company had no debt, strong cash reserves, and had not over-hired. He explained that the company's move to "lay down a rig" was a deliberate choice and a proactive attempt to control supply and demand. The managers worked together to develop talking points to explain this same thinking to each of their teams. The result was that employees felt that they – as a company – were in control.

² From interview with Ross cited in Bob Rosen's book, *Just Enough Anxiety*

Optimism

Research conducted by Barbara L. Fredrickson, associate professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, indicates that negative emotions narrow people's ideas about action. On the other hand, positive emotions such as hope and optimism broaden people's mindsets and encourage risk-taking, creativity, and innovation.

Leadership examples from throughout history demonstrate the power of optimism in rallying troops, reinventing and reinvigorating failing companies, and transforming entire nations. Dick Couch, CEO of Hypertherm, a metal cutting plant in New Hampshire, goes so far as to say, "I see my role as being an ambassador of optimism."

One of my favorite leadership lessons is the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton. In the early 1900s Shackleton and a crew of 27 men attempted to reach the South Pole. Their ship, The Endurance, became stuck in pack ice and eventually sank. The men managed to live on ice flows for almost two years before the heroic efforts of Shackleton and several others resulted in their rescue. The journals and reports of the crew all maintained that Shackleton's unfailing optimism throughout the ordeal was the secret to the survival of every man.

Strive for a blend of "realistic optimism."

When Lehman Brothers announced bankruptcy in September, employees throughout the financial industry started to panic. The Navy Federal Credit Union in Vienna, Virginia responded with a letter from its president. In the letter, employees were reassured with the reminder that the credit union is a very conservative organization that never ventured into subprime lending. At the same time, the president explained that the credit union was not immune. This blend of "realistic optimism" is something that leaders should strive for.

"There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great and no tonic so powerful as expectation of something better tomorrow."

- Orison Marden,
19th Century Thought Leader

"It's all about hope. Hope engages and excites people about what's possible. It motivates and mobilizes human energy."

- Bob Rosen

Purpose

When people are working on the tactical details of day-to-day operations it's easy to become myopic and stressed about the short-term. Look for opportunities to remind employees of the greater purpose behind their work and the organization. The simple act of stating, "what you do, matters" helps to energize people and inspire action.

Organizational renewal experts Brandon Mikel Smith and Mary Ann Glynn write, "Creating a sense of greater purpose for an organization is perhaps one of the most positive and enduring gifts a leader can give. A clearly articulated organizational purpose not only provides members of an organization with a frame for making sense of the world, but also provides the foundation upon which to build an organization that is compassionate and resilient during times of both munificence and uncertainty."

Jim Owens, Senior Vice President for North America operations of H.B. Fuller, stresses that the leader's job is to put a positive path forward and to be clear about what targets people – and the organization as a whole – need to hit. He says, "Don't leave it up to people to translate and fill in the gaps on their own."

"The most effective way to turn fear into confidence is to be clear; to define the future in such vivid terms that we can all see where you, and thus we, are headed."

- Marcus Buckingham

The people who work in the plant at Clifton Adhesive are focused on doing their jobs well and making high quality adhesives, but for a while, they really didn't know how important their jobs truly were. The stuff they made on a daily basis pretty much all looked the same to them, that is, until the leaders at Clifton started holding regular meetings with the plant staff to show them exactly how their products are used. They soon realized that what they make goes into life saving equipment, military and space components and other critical applications. Mike Barch, Clifton's Account Manager, says that the response has been overwhelmingly positive and that the employees always ask when next presentation is scheduled.

Engagement

The final element of the COPE model is engagement. By engagement, I mean actively involving your employees in looking for solutions. Engaged employees understand and care about what is happening and what the company's strategy is for moving forward. They also feel that they have meaningful ways to contribute.

When your organization is dealing with challenges, provide opportunities for your employees to get involved in problem-solving. Doing so not only increases employees' sense of control, it also unites your organization and helps you come up with solutions! As Judy Rosenblum and her colleagues from Duke Corporate Education write, "Execution . . . starts with engaged people, people who understand the strategy, believe it is meaningful to them and understand how they personally can contribute to its success."

Denver-based Sashco Sealants recently invited employees to submit cost-savings suggestions. The dozens of suggestions they received were shared in weekly "huddles" with representatives from each function and unit. Each team was encouraged to implement the ideas and then report back on results. The company is already reporting significant savings.

Penny Culbreth-Graft, the City Manager for Colorado Springs, is in charge of helping the city deal with a budget shortfall of more than \$23 million. One of the successful approaches Culbreth-Graft has utilized is to give more leeway to workers who want to tackle projects outside of their normal job descriptions. For example, two city employees completed a project concerning city codes in just 60 days. What makes this example particularly remarkable is that this wasn't the type of project these two employees usually worked on and the regular team hadn't made any progress in two years!

"Employees are going to talk about their worries whether the company provides a venue or not. Why not harness that dialogue and direct it toward positive outcomes?"

- Robert Holland

Step #4: Unleash Energy

So, you have built trust, communicated openly and honestly, and helped your people regain feelings of control, optimism, purpose, and engagement. You might think your work is done, but to truly promote productivity and protect profitability you need to unleash energy among your individuals and in your organization.

Organization researchers are discovering what you may already know intuitively: energy plays a critical role in individual, team, and organizational performance. Consider this: Rob Cross and his colleagues from IBM's Institute for Knowledge-Based Management, the University of Michigan, and the University of Virginia collaboratively studied the flow of energy in the workplace and found that people who are "energizers:"

- are more likely to have their ideas considered and put into action;
- get more input, information, and commitment from those around them; and
- attract the commitment of other high performers.

In addition, people who worked with and around energizers tended to perform better than those who worked with or around de-energizers.

"Energy is the fuel that powers the engines of performance."

- Richard Neslund

Picture the last time you were in a big airport – Denver maybe. All throughout the concourse are long, moving walkways. What do some people do when they get to a moving walkway? THEY STOP WALKING! They just kind of lean back, and wait for the sidewalk to get them to their destination. What about the people in your organization? Are they sitting back and waiting for someone else to get them there? Or do they have the energy, motivation, and drive to take action and move forward themselves?

Are you an energizing leader?

Being an energizing leader is not about delivering motivational speeches and holding pizza parties at work. While the ability to inspire is important, effective leaders recognize that being an energizer is not about “projecting” energy as much as it’s about uncovering and unleashing energy to achieve a specific result.

Where does energy come from? In developing our book, *Change at the Core*, my co-author Myron Radio and I discovered that there are four sources of energy at work inside organizations:

1. Individual team members’ style, passion, and mindset (Internal Energy)
2. Productive interpersonal and small group conversations (Interpersonal Energy)
3. Alignment at the team or unit level around values, goals, and approaches (Group Energy)
4. A shared sense of urgency and commitment to action across the organization (Organizational Energy)

In *Change at the Core*, we provide the details on how to unleash energy. On the next page, we take a look at an example of how unleashing energy enabled one group to enhance productivity – even in difficult times.

Plugging into Passions

Contributed by Myron Radio, president of the R-Group and co-author of [Change at the Core](#).

A marketing and sales organization was historically growing its net income at a rate of 6 percent a year. Unfortunately, the market indicators showed that a slowdown in its industry and the industries it sold into was about to occur. In a meeting with the CEO of the parent company, employees projected net income to be flat at \$75 million in the coming year. They saw this as a stretch objective, given the gloomy forecast by the industry experts. Upon hearing this, the CEO sat up straight in his chair and said, “Seventy-five million! Walking into this room I intended to tell you that a 6 percent growth rate isn’t good enough. Within three years I expect you to contribute \$200 million in net income to our enterprise.” Jaws dropped as the CEO left the room. One person after another asked, “Where did he get that number? Did he pull it out of the air?” The organization stewed for about a month.

The senior executives then called together 200 members from around the world to decide what to do about this \$200 million bogey. They hired us to design and lead the meeting. Based on our previous interactions with this group, we guessed that the top three passions for almost every member of the group were Passion for Results, Leading, and Knowledge. With this information, we designed a three-day workshop. As the group convened, we asked the group, “If we could do one thing to get us closer to the \$200 million target, what would that one thing be?” After a dead silence, the facilitator said, “Let me ask this question in a different way: If we could learn what causes growth in our sector (Knowledge) and if we could use this knowledge to develop a world-class business unit (Leading), what would one thing be that we could we do to get closer to the \$200 million prize (Results)?”

Surprising as it may seem, one idea slowly surfaced after another. A list of 25 ideas was generated and then culled down to the 10 that could have the most impact. The group was split into sub-teams of 20 volunteers each to begin to work on the idea that they felt (1) the most energy toward; or (2) the one they felt they could positively impact the most. One of the outputs from their work together was a high-level estimate of the dollar impact related to their area of focus. When all was tallied, the organization leaders felt that they could move from \$75 million to \$125 million within three years. While this was far short of the goal, it gave the group members hope that they could at least move the needle forward.

This organization worked extremely hard and engaged its entire workforce in this initiative. In every internal communication (newsletters, meetings, presentations, updates, conferences, etc.) and in every external publication (annual report, editorials, advertisements, tradeshow, etc.) leaders spoke in terms of their passion for Knowledge, Leading, and Getting Results. The message resonated across the board because it was congruent with the energy they put forth. The end of the story is this: The organization did NOT achieve the \$200 million goal at the end of year three—the goal was actually achieved at the end of year two!

Summary

We are living and working in challenging times. It may seem as if the future of your organization is out of your control – but it doesn't have to be. As a leader, you set the tone for your team and your organization. You can't control the economy, but you can significantly influence the people who work for and with you. You can not only prevent panic, but also promote productivity.

Your own mindset matters most.

An interesting byproduct of taking steps to transform others' anxiety into energy is that doing so increases your own sense of control, optimism, purpose, and engagement.

Michigan business professor Robert Quinn argues that when we are reactive, we become filled with fear and other negative emotions. He writes, "We thus begin to get depressed and we begin to slowly die on the inside. The challenge is to stop problem solving and to start purpose finding. When we do we start to have greater influence and impact because we have made a change in our being state. We have moved from the normal condition of being acted upon to the extraordinary condition of being an actor, initiator, and creator. We create our own best self."

I hope you will use the ideas in this e-book to reconnect with your own best self and to be a force for optimism in your organization.

You have the power to transform anxiety into energy!

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