

Four Ways to Do More with Less (Really)

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As some may recall, the fifth season of HBO drama *The Wire* centered on a downsizing newspaper in Baltimore. The theme had particular significance for the show's creator, David Simon, who had worked as a Baltimore Sun reporter before grudgingly accepting a buyout offer in 1995.

In a 2007 interview with *The New Yorker*, Simon reflected on the experience. "The newsroom I worked in had 450 people. Now it's got 300. Management says: 'We have to do more with less.' That's the bulls— of bean counters who care only about the bottom line. You do less with less."

Amid competitive pressures and a challenging global economy, "doing more with less" has become somewhat of a battle cry for today's organizations. But far from rallying recession-weary troops, it often evokes the skepticism expressed by Simon.

The reaction is understandable. In many companies, "doing more with less" is shorthand for continually raising the bar on goals and expectations while spending less money. For employees, it means that management wants you to work longer hours or accomplish more in the same amount of time. And because management is watching costs, it is unlikely to give workers what they need to do the job well.

It's frustrating, especially to loyal employees who want to deliver results. These employees commonly respond by hunkering down and soldiering on, despite feeling overworked and overburdened.

Motivated ... and Frustrated

Perhaps they can take comfort in knowing that they are not alone. Our research and experience suggest that 20% or more of the workforce of a typical company feel frustrated. We're not referring to unmotivated or turned-off employees. That group is likely to be too checked-out to experience personal stress or conflict over their inability to get things done. Rather, we're talking about employees who are aligned with goals and objectives and enthusiastic about making a difference—only to be held back by jobs that don't suit them or by work environments that get in their way.

From a motivational perspective, managers have these employees where they want them. When it comes to ensuring that they produce as much as possible, managers are missing out.

To get the most from their teams, managers must match the emphasis on engaging employees with a similar commitment to enabling them.

Want to draw more productivity out of fewer resources?

Here are some initial steps.

1. Specify "must-win" battles. Where employees have too much to do and too little time to do it, clarify key priorities to let them focus on essential, value-added tasks.

2. Avoid the trap of routines. Since efficient execution is only helpful if directed at the right targets, evaluate work processes regularly to ensure that they're aligned with changing work demands.

3. Treat training as a process, not an event. Revisit training frequently in dynamic environments. Otherwise, skills and abilities that once made employees strong contributors can quickly become obsolete.

4. Provide "specific freedom to act." Clarify the scope of employees' authority, so that fear of overstepping boundaries doesn't become a disincentive to taking risks or making even-simple decisions.

Armed with a perspective aimed at enabling workers, you'll find that "doing more with less" has new meaning. The traditional view, from both the organization's and employee's perspective, is all about what employees need to do to help organizations accomplish more with fewer resources. The enabling view shifts the focus to how managers and leaders need to respond.

In this context, "doing more with less" doesn't mean conjuring up ever-higher levels of motivation, but rather unleashing the full potential of frustrated employees—those who want to give their best, but can't because of organizational barriers and constraints.