By Karen E. Klein

Violence, tragedy, fear, job insecurity: The series of events that have occurred in the last few months reads like a checklist of factors that create stress and reduced workplace performance. As an entrepreneur, you want to make certain that your company starts 2002 with renewed fervor and dedication to peak performance.

Yet your top managers, your key salespeople, and your valuable customer-service professionals may be suffering from lack of motivation, personal worry, and the unsettling feeling that they have lost control of their futures. How do you avoid the employee health problems, increased absenteeism, diminished motivation and reduced productivity that may well result from prolonged stress and uncertainty?

BusinessWeek Online's Smart Answers columnist Karen E. Klein talked to Dr. Ian Anderson, deputy-chairman of Global Consulting Partnership, about motivating key employees in difficult times.

Q: What is the Global Consulting Partnership?

A: We're a consulting firm based in Philadelphia, but with clients all over the world, that helps top-performing employees deal with personal and performance-related issues to aid in the success of their companies. We're affiliated with 200 behavior-change experts -- 90% of whom have Ph.D.s -- who work with a whole variety of small business and corporate clients in a human resources context.

Q: Why focus on the top-performers? Doesn't it make more sense to work with the employees whose performance needs improvement?

A: The answer may seem counterintuitive, but no. We've found that it creates the greatest value for the company if we take top performers and try to make them that much better. What we do with the best employees also provides a model for the people who aren't doing so well, and we focus on them subsequently. Working first with the most promising employees also creates buy-in for the rest of the staff, who see it not as a remedial process, but as a reward.

Q: What toll has September 11 and its aftermath -- biological terror, economic downturn, a climate of fear -- taken on our workplace psyche?

A: Well, there's no doubt that a lot of people are dealing with stress and fear and worry, and it's important for heads of companies to understand that and to realize that people process those emotional reactions at their own pace. Appropriate professional help should be offered -- but never forced -- if it seems that some employees are not experiencing a lessening of the trauma over time. Just remember that it's as big a mistake to force people to take professional help as it is not to provide it at all. The motivation should come from the individual.
himself.

I think also, however, out of common crisis usually comes a heightened sense of belonging and community and that is one thing that business owners can use to help their employees take steps to recovery. The acts of terrorism that are designed to undermine confidence and cripple our way of life become almost self-defeating if instead they create courage and resolve. I think that's what we're seeing today. It's like the blitz of London during World War II. It was supposed to discourage and undermine the ability of the nation to respond, but it had the opposite effect.

Q: What can small-business owners do to motivate and reenergize their key employees in this new year?

A: The end of one year, or the beginning of the next, is a good time to communicate with employees about the company's performance and their own personal performance. Start with the company as a whole, and then take it to the employee level: What have you done well this year? What could be done better and how? What did you do poorly? If you'd taken a different course of action in a particular transaction or decision, what might the results have been? Encouraging self-reflection is the first building block of leadership development.

Q: Once employees have been asked questions, and answered them, where does the process go?

A: Well, the answers should be evaluated and some identification should be made for what needs to be done differently, at a basic level. Some companies bring in a consulting firm like ours to do formal goal-setting and evaluations and create plans. Others assign employees an internal mentor, so that two people work together on a formal review process aimed at providing change for the better in the coming year.

Even if it's just an employee and the boss working one-on-one, they could set some specific goals and break those goals down into specific behaviors. If a goal was to communicate more effectively with co-workers, for instance, they'd try to come up with concrete behavioral changes, such as copying down information better, listening more closely during meetings, that kind of thing. Then they could try a behavior experiment, where new behaviors would deliberately be tried out at the next company meeting, the results evaluated, the behavior modified if necessary, and tried again in a different context. Keep doing it and improving upon it, and eventually it becomes a part of who you are.

Q: What does this process ultimately mean for the company's bottom line?

A: By encouraging your company's top performers to re-evaluate their skills and needs, I believe you create new energy and enable them to find areas of improvement. And helping your most productive performers will help you as a business owner set positive, realistic business goals for the new year as well. Have a question about running your business? Ask our small-business experts. Send us an e-mail at smartanswers@businessweek.com, or write to Smart Answers, BW Online, 46th Floor, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020. Please include your real name and phone number in case we need more information; only your initials and city will be printed. Because of the volume of mail, we won't be able to respond to all questions personally.

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