

ECONOMIC & POLICY UPDATE

VOLUME 22, ISSUE 11

Editors: Will Snell & Nicole Atherton



More with Less.... Really?

Author(s): Steve Isaacs

Published: November 29th, 2022

We've all heard it. Budgets are tight. Profits are down. Vacancies are not filled. People are laid off. So... those who are left have to do their own jobs... and the jobs of those who aren't here... and we're going to do MORE? REALLY?

It's well-intentioned and probably said in an attempt to motivate those who are still around. Most bosses, managers, and administrators have probably said it at one time or another, "We have to do more with less." The idea is to buckle down and do even better (and more) than we have before. REALLY?

Perhaps it's a compliment to those who are left, an endorsement of the confidence of their managers. Perhaps it's an insult to those who have left, that not only are we not going to miss you, but we're going to do more than we did while you were here. REALLY?

If indeed we expect to accomplish "more with less," then perhaps we weren't operating very efficiently before. Economists would say we had slack resources, and maybe we really did need to reduce staffing. If we're going to actually accomplish "more with less," then we probably weren't doing very well before.

If, however, an organization was operating efficiently, we should expect that the loss of valuable personnel will inevitably lead to a drop in productivity. An attempt to wring more out of fewer people is at best what Susan Fowler would refer to as an IMPOSED motivational outlook. Fowler describes an Imposed outlook as being driven by pressure, guilt, obligation, or expectations; and it is not an optimal outlook. It is not a motivational outlook that is sustainable.

So, now what? What's the goal? Is it really to increase productivity? Or, is it to keep the train on the tracks till things improve? Or, is it an opportunity to prioritize, or to look for efficiencies beyond expecting people to work harder?

Prioritize. What's the most important thing we have to do? What's the least important, or the least productive? It is usually easier to identify and focus on the most important or most valuable components. Deciding what should go is harder. We have to ask, "why are we doing this?" Does it

fulfill our mission or are we doing it because we always have? Which, if that's the only reason, is a terrible reason. Prioritize.

Look for efficiencies. While this should have always been a responsibility, never waste a crisis. Look for things that can be done cheaper, quicker, with fewer resources. Be careful. Don't make a cut that leads to a loss in productivity that's greater than the cost savings. Make sure a cut makes economic sense.

A pet peeve, "We're going to cut all but essential travel." Does that mean we were doing non-essential travel? Why? If it wasn't essential, we shouldn't have been doing it in the first place. Make sure a cut makes economic sense.

All this should be part of the organization's predetermined strategy. While we should not plan for failure, we should plan for adversity. Know the mission. Know the goals. Prioritize the goals and the tactics. Run a contingency planning exercise occasionally. Start with, "What'll we do if..."

We anticipate growth. We probably should anticipate contractions. Don't wait till the opportunity arises to develop a plan to grow. Don't wait till budgetary disaster strikes to figure out what to do.

Know what absolutely HAS to happen, what can be delayed, what can be cut. A good time to examine whether it should've been cut is before adversity strikes. But for sure when it does.

If you're running a good organization, don't expect "more with less." Change "more with less" to "more of our best with less, and less of some of the other stuff."

Recommended Citation Format:

Isaacs, S. "[More with Less.... Really?](#)" *Economic and Policy Update* (22):11, Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Kentucky, November 29th, 2022.

Author(s) Contact Information:

[Steve Isaacs](#) | Extension Professor | sisaacs@uky.edu