

Roxanne Emmerich: How to opt out of the recession

By Casey Selix | Friday, May 29, 2009

Ninety percent of Roxanne Emmerich's banking clients are seeing record quarters and years, even though many of their competitors and much of the business world are in the throes of the worst recession in decades.

What's the secret? Everyone wants to know, judging from the evidence that her new book, ["Thank God It's Monday! How to Create a Workplace You and Your Customers Love"](#) (FT Press, 2009), appears to be flying off the shelves. In its first week, "Thank God It's Monday!" topped Amazon.com's business bestseller list and landed spots on similar lists for the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times.

Eighteen months ago, Emmerich says she called the CEOs of all her banking clients to discuss the coming recession. "I said to be sure to send a memo around to customers, staff and all of their people that, 'There will be a recession coming for *other* people and *we did not sign up*. Recessions are when we pull ahead, so let's outsmart, outwit, out-execute in every possible way. This is our time to really pull ahead.' And just by acquiring that and celebrating the steps along the way, they had amazing results."

Make no mistake: [Emmerich](#) is fully aware of the cynics out there who are rolling their eyes at the notion of loving Mondays instead of Fridays and at one more cure-all for the disgruntled, disengaged workforce. She discusses how to transform workplaces in a Q&A with MinnPost.

First, a few details about her: Emmerich (pronounced Emmerick) is president and CEO of [The Emmerich Group](#) in Minneapolis, which advises clients ranging from community banks to big pharma across the nation. Depending on seasonal needs, the consultancy has up to 15 on staff in the local office and about three-dozen employees nationwide. She also has served as an adviser to former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson on reinventing state government.

MinnPost: "Thank God It's Monday" was No. 3 on a recent Wall Street Journal bestseller list for hardcover business books and No. 11 on the New York Times how-to list. Which points do you think — and hope — are resonating with readers?

Roxanne Emmerich: I think what's really resonating is that right now a lot of people are being laid off and they're confused about how to get back into the workplace. They're giving up hope. And there are a lot of people left behind after the layoffs, and so they have double the work and half the friends, and so they're kind of freaked out.



Roxanne Emmerich

If you look at workplace statistics, that 70 percent of employees are disengaged from their jobs, there comes a point when we all want to come back to having that powerful feeling at work. I think the point that is really resonating with people is it can happen and you don't have to give up hope ... and that regardless of their position they can make a huge difference.

MP: No doubt, employers and workers hunger for strategies to make a profit and stay employed during this recession. What are three steps any company can take to deal with the uncertainty in the workplace and get people focused on growing the business?

RE: For one thing, they need to clean up the messes. When I say clean up the messes, I mean dysfunctional behaviors. People need to put a line in the sand and make those [behaviors] non-negotiable — the excuses, whining and gossip and all those destructive things that are considered to be really normal in the workplace. ... They're very cruel and they're very inappropriate and they're very hurtful. ... And they're very hurtful to a company's profit.

I've been doing a program for 20 years called "Kick-Butt Kick-Off," where we work with the managers in the afternoon and then all the employees in the evening. What we're really doing is cleaning up the messes. We're getting them to agree that this is how we're going to treat each other and this is how we're going to treat our employees and this is how we're going to treat our customers — and we all agree, with no exceptions, that if anybody falls out of alignment with the agreement, anyone can [confront them]. ... And [we agree] we're not going to allow these behaviors any more. I think one thing to make very, very clear is what are the non-negotiables.

Another piece to make very, very clear is what are the two to three key things that success looks like for the organization and to align everybody and everything to these two to three things, and have daily, weekly and quarterly celebrations that are about those particular things.

As people get in alignment, they begin to feel how to win. The key is that people want to wait until the end of the year to celebrate something — that's just really quite insane. When you're making progress along the way, you should be celebrating along the way. Because that's how the neuro-pathways of the brain reconnect with [positive messages]: "I'm confident I can do things; I'm powerful. If I can do that, what can I do next week?" Part of what we've forgotten how to do in the workplace is to be about the celebration of successes.

Everybody thinks they need to be morose because these are tough times. ... But we have a whole division that specializes in banks, and right now 90 percent of our banks are having record quarters and record years. I called them all a year and a half ago to talk to the CEOs, and I said to be sure to send a memo around to customers, staff and all of their people that (said), "There will be a recession coming for other people and *we did not sign up*. Recessions are when we pull ahead, so let's outsmart, outwit, out-execute in every possible way. This is our time to really pull ahead." And just by acquiring that and celebrating the steps along the way, they had amazing results.

The third thing is, and this is the part that seems so obvious but it's *so not* practiced in business: You keep hearing about customer satisfaction. Well, nobody cares about customer satisfaction. The only thing that matters is customer *success*. People get engaged when they're about helping the customers become successful as opposed to just satisfying a customer. When they know that their work matters and they know that they're going above and beyond at every step of the game, that intrinsic reward is so far beyond the money and the benefits and all those kinds of things that managers *think* matter the most.

People want to be a part of something grand. We've lost those opportunities in business today because leaders have forgotten how to lead people to greatness by just making it clear that, hey, if we really make a difference in the world, we will be an abundant world.

MP: How would you get managers and employees at AIG — and other companies under intense scrutiny because of risky financial behavior — to buy into the "Thank God It's Monday" philosophy?

RE: It [the notion of TGIM] might seem frivolous, but this is a bottom-line issue. Most businesses have taken themselves way too seriously, and that's how they got into the trouble they've gotten into. ... As I've gotten out and about [over 20 years of consulting and giving 150 speeches a year], one of the things I've noticed is that the further they (businesses) go away from fourth-grade language, and the further they go away from celebration, the less likely they are to grow a profit.

I would go back to this: OK, forgive yourselves for everything of the past; you can't do a thing about this. Say you're sorry and then cut it dry and move on from this point on. But now let's get about making some difference in the world; let's get about really getting people engaged, making a difference for customers. ... Companies like that (AIG, etc.) need it more than anyone. I've worked with several banks over the years that were in the claws of the FDIC. One of them, now 4 1/2 years later, was just listed as one of the top-100 safest banks in the country. They are always in the top 5 to 10 percent in terms of growth and profitability.

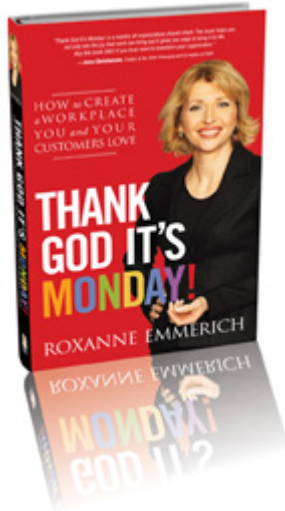
When we started working with them, one of the things that the CEO had said to me was, "Well, we're in a state with one of the highest poverty rates in the country and that's just how it is." I stuck my fingers in my ears and I said, "I'm not listening, I'm not listening, I'm not listening. I am not buying into external circumstances being the reason for your results. If you get about helping people *get out of* poverty, this bank will thrive." So it's the same message, and this is the stuff that we're not teaching in the business schools.

MP: How do you get that message across then — just say no excuses allowed?

RE: You get it across through leadership. And leadership is not just a management position. I've seen receptionists be the person who turns the organization around. It's somebody who takes a stand and says, "Come on, guys, let's get going here. ... Our shoes are shined and we are ready to go and we said we were going to create some miracles and here we are shooting wildly for mediocrity. I say we go for such-and-such." Truly, there's a receptionist here in Minnesota that I worked with years and years ago and she literally turned the whole company around.

MP: How did she do that?

RE: We call it the drip-drip-drip method. Drip-drip-drip means you go into your boss and you say, "Hey, Tom, I really want to improve the customer service that we have here. I'd like to be in charge of doing some customer-service training and create some standards around our moments of truth and make sure we celebrate those moments of truth. Would that be OK?" If he says, "Well, no, I don't think it would be OK," the person comes back the next day and says, "Hey, Tom, I've been thinking about this and I really want to do this."



What you do is just the same thing that teenagers do: You appear to be unable to hear, and you just keep driving it home until finally they go, "OK then; OK then." Oftentimes, leaders are just so overwhelmed they can't imagine taking something else on and they can't imagine somebody else can do it. ... Sometimes I'll have people come up to me at boot camp and say, "Aww, we really want to do this but our boss, he's really bad." And I say, "You know what, your boss is human. He's got all those elements [good and bad] so why are you beating him up for the bad? Of course he's going to have the bad, he's breathing; so go help him figure out to be more good. That's how you become more good, and stop beating him up for not being perfect."

MP: Over the years, we've seen employers try any number of programs and strategies to boost productivity and improve attitudes — from Six Sigma to slogans like "work smarter, not harder." How do you respond to those who might roll their eyes at the idea of loving Mondays?

RE: Well, I can walk into almost every organization and I will get the people at the back table with their arms crossed and their eyes rolled. And I'm always thinking, "Bring it on," because I know that's coming. Most of the [improvement] initiatives we've had over the years, they're all good things ... but the part that people have been missing all along is that culture is the leading predictor to future profitability and growth. But nobody wants to look at culture, or they think we'll just do a "culture assessment."

Well, a culture assessment doesn't *change* a culture. A significant emotional event changes a culture. Getting people to make agreements changes the culture. Celebrating the results along the way, that changes the culture. The danger of so many of these rollouts and all the quality movements — and, again, much of it is very good — is that without the culture shift stuff, nothing happens. ... So when I get people being suspicious, I ask them to use their common sense. Hey, if one out of every three payroll dollars is lost due to disengagement, how can you afford not to?

MP: Could you explain more about the need to "bust baditudes" and to "vanquish energy vampires," those who sap the strength of their colleagues with whining and dysfunctional behavior? There are plenty of documented cases of whiny whistleblowers who were ignored when it turned out they were right all along and might have saved their organizations from disaster. Is there any risk of "group-think" overtaking a workplace — where people won't feel free to point out the downside?

RE: These are great questions. Not only do I encourage people in pointing out the downside but I require it of people. That said, there are very healthy ways to do that and very unhealthy ways to do that...and people don't seem to know those distinctions. So a healthy way to deal with that is to use language that advances the situation.

So if I call you up and I say, "Casey, I'm really mad at my boss and I can't believe what he did. He's a jerk, he's a loser; can you believe what he did?" — that's not advancing the situation. If I call you up and I say, "Casey, I'm having a problem with my boss. He's not agreeing with me on such and such. Here are his points, here are my points. What do you think about that and how can I go to him and feel better understood on my points because I'm not feeling understood."

And then I go to the boss and say, "Hey, I'm not feeling understood. I'd like to mention a few more points and to make sure that I'm understanding you and to make sure that you're understanding me." That would be a productive way. The problem is that most people, when things don't go the way they want to go, they just get snippy and mean and gossipy and whiny — and those are such destructive behaviors. When you're whining, you're not really doing any good for anybody. [What we teach] about is how do you use "advancing" language; it's really how to grow up. I think what we do is we teach people how to grow up.

MP: Give me some more examples of how you turn unhealthy behaviors around.

RE: One of the things we do is teach them how to affirm each other and how to celebrate the successes and have rituals of celebration because when you're focusing on positive things, you're not caught up in the negative things. It's really a matter of where are you focusing your attention. I love Dr. Daniel Amen's book ["Change Your Brain, Change Your Life."](#) What it's basically doing is forcing you to rewire your brain to think about gratitude — things that are good. I'm a firm believer in that. I'm not being Pollyanna-ish. You have to be realistic and I'm very realistic, but I'm also very aware that people are very prone to focus on the negative, wrap their arms around it and set down stakes and hide behind it.

One of the more powerful things we're teaching employers is to get their employees to "call it tight." Calling it tight basically means if someone is whining, you can immediately say, "Hey, Casey, that sounds like a whine now. What do you want to say to advance the situation?" So, you stop it right where it's at and move it through.

My contention is that most organizations go, "Oh, somebody is unmanageable, let's talk to their manager." Well, that just takes too long. The manager is not likely to hear about it for a long time or to have direct evidence (of the behavior), but if the two of us are talking and you go there, and I don't have the integrity to say we made an agreement that we weren't going to whine and that we were going to advance, then I'm out of integrity. Integrity means if we made agreements on how we're going to treat each other and someone is out of alignment on those agreements, we move through.

MP: You have 20 years of going into these organizations and seeing a lot of issues and "opportunities." What would you say is the No. 1 mistake managers make? What would you like to say to those classes in business schools?

RE: I think the biggest mistake they make is they shoot too low. They don't understand the capacity of the human being to break through, so they basically look at Sally and say, "Sally is disorganized. Oh, poor Sally, she's disorganized; we'll just work around her," as opposed to going, "Sally, you need to get organized now. You need to create some habits; you need to shift those habits because we need you to be organized. We're asking for a commitment to make that happen."

Now that doesn't mean that every Sally can turn around because they all can't; it's more likely that they won't. Some people are addicted to drama and so they'd like to continue to have messes in their life and blame other people for it. Some of the stuff we cover in the kickoff is the addiction to victimhood and how we support victimhood. So, I think one of the most powerful things a leader can do is to set high expectations for people and when they're not meeting them to go, "Come on along, Laura; come on along, Pete. We need you. Give me a commitment that you're going to get caught up again."

People need someone taking a stand for them to be powerful. When we don't take a stand for people and we hold them down to that standard of mediocrity, we're really not good for them.

MP: How is your business doing during the recession?

RE: It's a hoot. We're having a ball. We didn't buy into the recession. Right now, people need what we have more desperately than ever and the most important thing is we're keeping focused on our customers' success. Nothing makes me happier.

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