These are tough times. We don’t need the media to tell us that the economic situation is affecting every aspect of our lives. Sure, we hope that things will get better, but right now our everyday life is different from what we once took for granted. Now, we go out to eat less often; we look for ways to save on our grocery bill; we try to reduce our transportation costs; and we take more time to consider our household or personal purchases.

Feeling the Pinch
Here at Boston College, we are all feeling the pinch of slimmer budgets, a rigorous analysis of hiring requests and, as appropriate, the necessity of redistributing workload within departments. Managers are facing some new challenges. One of those challenges is finding ways to keep yourself and your staff focused and moving forward in a steady, positive manner at a time when we are all feeling some anxiety about the economy.

What’s the Upside?
It’s pretty easy to see the downside of a tough economy. What’s the upside?
The changes we choose to make in our personal life in response to the rising costs of food and gas have an upside: we become more creative about how to get what we want and we become more skillful at discriminating between a “need” and a “want.” We are also likely to be more communicative with our family and friends as we figure out together how to navigate new territory. How can we make these same gains in our professional lives in the workplace?
Managing to Succeed

What steps can you take to lead your team in a direction of greater creativity, increased skills, and more open dialogue?

- Mobilize the talents on your team
- Reduce unnecessary stress
- Be constant and steady

Reduce Unnecessary Stress

Be understanding. Most of us favor the known over the unknown and any change requires us to travel in uncharted territory. Will we succeed? In addition to work stress, most people have some personal/family stress – a potent combination. Resistance to change is not an indicator of a bad attitude; it is a human response that is understandable.

Be a compassionate listener. Listening, reflection, and thoughtful, measured action are more important than ever. Listen to what people are saying to be sure you understand their concerns. Talk privately to individuals most affected; explore their ideas for achieving the same outcome you are after.

Keep communication flowing. Stress will increase when people feel left out of the loop. Provide regular updates, even if the “news” is minimal. An open-door policy is OK; even better is a proactive commitment to regular discussions with each person on your team and with the team as a whole. Address misinformation quickly; don’t let the grapevine be the main avenue for information in your department.

Mobilize the Talents on Your Team

Acknowledge reality. Changes in duties and responsibilities in your work group can create conflict, stress, and can result in lack-luster performance. Expertise in a particular job is built up over time and individuals tend to carefully guard their territory and their control over it. Changes that people had no role in shaping can result in defensiveness and shutting down. Without involvement by the people affected, any change in the way things are done is likely to be viewed with suspicion.

Use a team approach to re-vision how to get work done. Not every decision can or should be made by consensus. It makes sense, however, to have everyone on your team participate in problem solving and decision making about changes, economies, and efficiencies that could be made in response to tighter budgets. Changes determined in a collaborative, participatory manner are more likely to be successful.

Ask good questions. Place a specific goal before your team and ask questions that will open up their thinking and tap into their talents. For example:

- “How can we provide this service more effectively than we have in the past?”
- “What should we stop doing? What should we start doing? What should we continue doing?”
- “What are the pros and cons of the proposal we have before us?”

Be Constant and Steady

Stay focused on your job. Your job as a manager is to listen to people, observe their behavior, engage in dialogue, direct work products, make and guide changes, and evaluate outcomes and individual performance.

Refresh and repeat your main message. Refrain from thinking that saying things once or twice is enough – whether you are asking for ideas, giving feedback on performance or praising good work. Remember to repeat. Repetition is important. Repetition is critical. Repetition works.

Stay on course. Like the captain of a ship, you need to express confidence and competence. The members of your team look to you as a model and will follow your lead. Be a good model.