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The holidays can be a stressful time as it is. Add the uncertainties of a tanking economy and the typical workplace can become a pressure cooker. What are some companies doing to ease the stress level?

BY MARY K. PRATT
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Kelly LaCasse is learning the power of positive thinking.

LaCasse, the office manager at **OfficeWorks Inc.**, a Burlington office furniture dealership, recently adopted the mantra "This is the best day ever," a statement that her boss said in passing before a company meeting a few weeks ago. She typed up the motto, printed it out and taped it up at her desk. Now she and a co-worker greet each other with it every day.

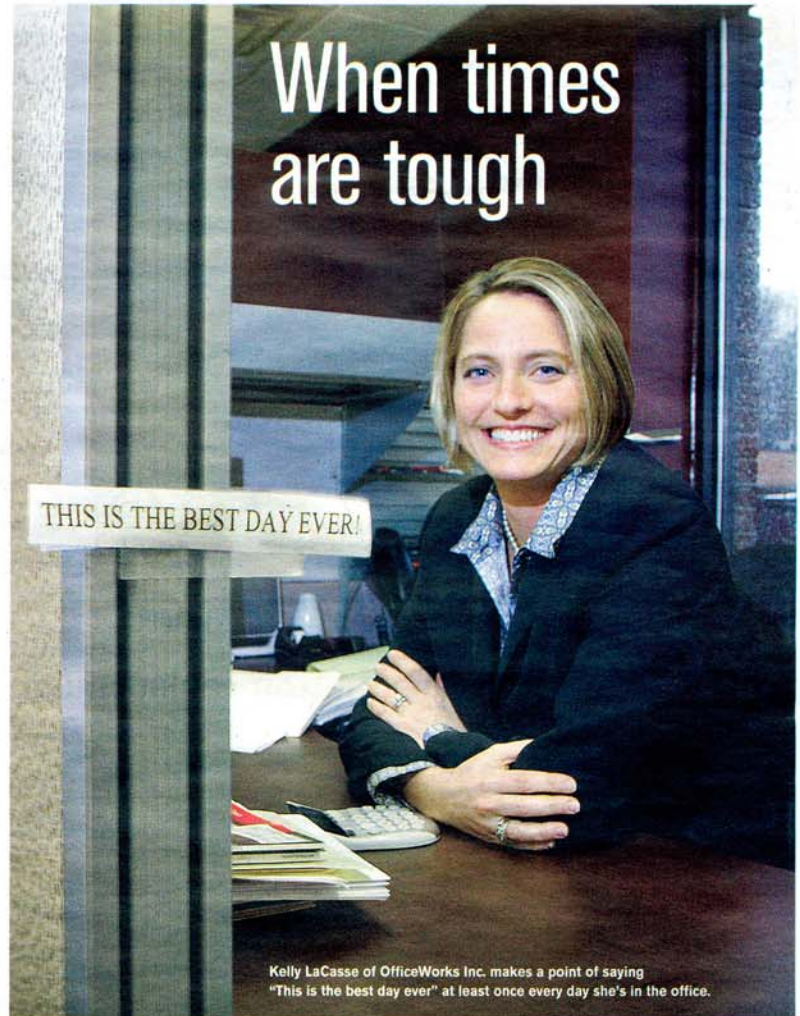
This might seem like a small step, but LaCasse and experts said it really helps keep the workplace calm when the declining economy, the soaring unemployment figures and the busyness of the holidays become overwhelming.

"Normally this time of year is stressful anyway, as workers deal with holidays and families and normal life. And then you throw on the layoffs and increasing unemployment, and stress levels are higher than they have been in the past," said **Bill Driscoll**, president of the New England district for **Robert Half International**, a staffing and consulting firm.

Companies should — and many do — play a role in helping employees cope with all the pressures that come at year's end. However, what has worked in the past might not be enough to ease the level of stress many feel right now. A one-time event won't be adequate, either — after all, an all-out holiday bash won't calm nerves when people are afraid of losing their jobs once the party's over. Rather, experts said companies should develop a culture that engages employees, acknowledges their worries and works with them throughout the year, adding additional support at stressful periods— whether it's around the holidays or any other time of the year.

"Companies are concerned with how the economic meltdown is affecting employees, their stress levels and their financial well-being, and it is absolutely necessary for employers to focus in on how to manage this effectively," said **Harry J. Sobel**, president of **Sobel & Raciti Associates Inc.**, which provides employee assistance programs, organizational and management consultation, leadership development, conflict management and employee opinion research from its offices in Wayland and Providence.

Sobel said holiday stress in a typical year isn't as severe as many believe. But this year, with the economy the way it is, many people are feeling anxious. As



Kelly LaCasse of OfficeWorks Inc. makes a point of saying "This is the best day ever" at least once every day she's in the office.

W. MARC BERNSAU | BUSINESS JOURNAL

STRESS: Companies take steps to ease tension in the workplace

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such, companies should focus on helping employees deal with their anxieties, particularly those related to the economy.

To that end, managers need to communicate openly about their company's performance, strategy and future, he said.

That has been one of the key practices at **Vestmark Inc.**, a Wakefield software company with about 75 employees that does a bulk of its work for financial services companies.

David Kimmelman, the company's vice president of talent services, said the company has always had monthly meetings and has continued them this fall, providing workers with updates about both positive and negative developments. Kimmelman said he believes the regular updates have helped allay fears and limit irrational thoughts and expectations.

"It's about consistent communication, so when you hit these tough times, you're going to have a better chance of keeping workers engaged," he said, adding that the company, despite its market focus, has had a successful year.

Kimmelman said he's also emphasizing to employees that the company

has employee assistance programs that provide a range of services — including a concierge service — to stressed-out workers.

"I made an extra push, just to make sure people remember it's out there in case they need it," he said. "That's something we do normally. We just added a little more emphasis with the down economy and the holidays."

Vestmark isn't ignoring the festiveness of the season, though. Kimmelman said the company is still holding a holiday party, as it does every year. He, like others, said it's important to recognize positives as well as this year's wide variety of negatives.

Driscoll said companies have a number of ways to highlight positives. Employers should find ways to keep up morale and recognize workers — bonuses if possible, career training, awards and the like.

"Sometimes a hand-written note about a job well done can be beneficial, too," he said.

Likewise, employees can focus on



Filomena Scibelli takes some time out in the relaxation room at DiCicco, Gulman & Co. LLP. A table-top fountain bubbles in the background.

positives themselves. "I think the biggest stress reducer is knowing you're going to have employment right now," Driscoll said.

Of course, such activities aren't particularly effective if a company or worker just engages in them once or twice at the holidays. "It has to be incorporated into the culture," Driscoll said.

Cheryl Burke, the COO at **DiCicco, Gulman & Co. LLP**, a Woburn-based

accounting firm, said the firm's managers as well as its rank-and-file workers are used to going through stressful periods — although it's usually during tax season and not the fall.

She said DGC has come up with ongoing activities to help everyone cope. They range from weekly company newsletters and quarterly meetings for disseminating information to training and employee recognition programs to game nights and special events during tax season. For example, she arranged to have the World Series trophy brought into the office last April, allowing workers to be photographed

with it by a professional photographer. Workers could also make a donation to the Jimmy Fund.

Of course, if any worker still feels stressed, they can visit the firm's relaxation room, where they can kick back, wrap up in a blanket and meditate to the sounds of a tabletop water fountain.

"Sometimes," Burke said, "people just need that little bit of a break."