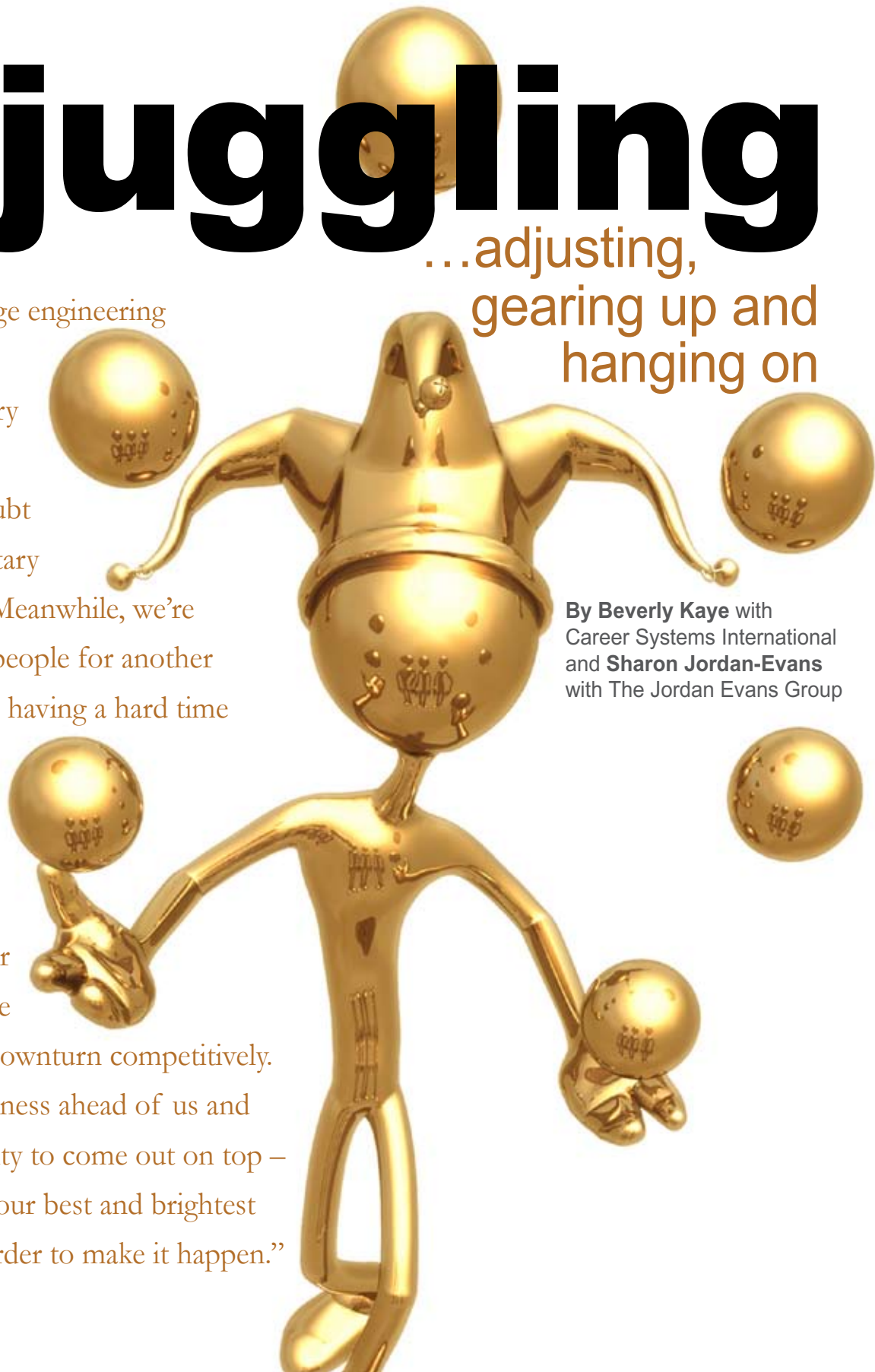

juggling

...adjusting,
gearing up and
hanging on

A senior leader in a large engineering organization said, “We just had a voluntary layoff in one business unit and we will no doubt follow with an involuntary downsizing there too. Meanwhile, we’re trying to hire talented people for another business unit and we’re having a hard time finding those with the skill sets and experience we need. And through it all, we must hang on to our talent or we won’t come out of this economic downturn competitively. We have plenty of business ahead of us and phenomenal opportunity to come out on top – but we definitely need our best and brightest to hang in with us in order to make it happen.”

By Beverly Kaye with
Career Systems International
and Sharon Jordan-Evans
with The Jordan Evans Group



What's your current reality? Are you laying off talent, trying to hire for specific positions or hoping to just hang on to your best people during all the uncertainty? Or are you doing all three?

As co-authors of *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*, we've had the opportunity to chat directly with leaders at all levels about what's happening to them now, what they're most concerned about and what they're doing about those concerns. We compared notes with our consultants and facilitators nationwide and found there are at least five issues that are raised over and over. Here are some of the most common questions, thoughts and manager "push backs" and our responses to each.

Q & A Snippets

Q Engagement and retention are definitely back-burnered as important issues for now. My employees should quit whining and be glad they have jobs.

A We heard this refrain from many managers during the U.S. recession of 2001 and 2002. They thought it or (worse yet) said it to their employees. What happened as a result? The minute the economic lights came back on, the best and brightest people (overworked and demoralized, with updated resume in hand) started looking. They logged onto job search sites by the thousands and answered recruitment calls from head-hunters with gusto. From 2003 through 2006, numerous surveys cited that 50 to 80% of employees were actively looking for new work. And they found it!

Your attitude and actions toward your valuable workers during this economic downturn will, to a large degree, predict your ability to keep them once the economy improves. We've seen it happen. So have you.

Q If even I don't know what will happen in the future, how can I have conversations about loyalty and commitment?

A Your talented people don't expect you to have all the answers, but they sure want to have the conversations. One V.P. of engineering called his direct reports in (one at a time) and said this, "We're laying people off and yes, there is tremendous uncertainty regarding the future – for all of us. But I want you to know how important you are to me and to this team and organization. I'd like you to hang in here with me if you can. I need your help now, during the storm, and I

certainly need it after the storm clears. I can't promise anything and wish I could. But I can thank you for all you have done and hopefully will do with and for the company and me." That V.P. kept all of his direct reports during and following layoffs, salary freezes and tough times.

Your people watch how you interact with them now that you face belt-tightening efforts. They notice if you hide behind closed doors or invite them in to talk about their worries, their workloads, their future. The loyalty you have built to date and continue to build during tough times will increase the odds that good people will stay longer and work harder for you.

Q I can't give them a raise, their bonuses or any perks for the foreseeable future. How can I hope to hang on to my top talent?

A The same way you hang on in good times. (Remember, it's not all about the money.) Have "stay interviews" with your talented people. Find out what matters most to them – is it a little more flexibility in work hours, a chance to learn something new this year,



more customer interaction (or less?), the opportunity to participate on a task force that's exploring a brand new product or service, or the chance to discuss and deal with these tough economic issues? Once you know what each one wants, team with him or her, get creative and find a way to make it happen.

Don't stop asking because you're afraid you can't deliver. Your employees know you can't hand them the moon when things are so tough. But they will notice that you care enough to ask what they want and need and they'll appreciate your doing your best to deliver on their requests.

Q I've never been asked to do so much with so little. We've cut budgets, discretionary spending, even staff. I don't have time for these "nice-to-have" conversations with my people.

A If you don't have time for this, how will you find time to recruit, interview, select, orient, and train these talented employees' replacements? These conversations don't have to take a great deal of time. They can be added to other scheduled meetings and regular one-on-one dialogues. The important thing is to give employees some personal attention during stressful periods like this one. One manager announced to her team that she would make it her business to grab ten minutes with each of them over the next three weeks. She knew these were stressful times and gave herself time to reach out to them.

Q How can we continue to send a message about engagement and retention while we lay good people off? It feels counter intuitive and I'm afraid the message will be met with cynicism.

A Fair enough. It may seem paradoxical but it is true that a retention message during layoffs not only makes sense, but is crucial. Following downsizing, your vulnerability for employee disengagement and departure actually goes up. We know this from looking at history and tracking the "second wave" of departures that follow restructuring and tough times. A senior leader told his employees at an all hands meeting, "You might think it's odd that we have a speaker today on the topic of engagement and retention, especially given our recent layoff. Here is what I know. We have a lot of work to do. We have big contracts to deliver on and we're poised to do it. But we cannot do it if we lose talent – leaders and individual contributors alike. We must keep our eye on the ball. We must not lose momentum in the engagement and retention arena."

Bottom Line

Good economy or bad, your best people always have choices. Will they choose you?

Talent is everything. That's why engagement and retention matter more than ever before. Managers need their best people to stay with them longer, fully engaged and producing at their peak.

Efforts to engage and retain talent should not be something you turn on and off, dancing to the latest economic blip and the corresponding concern about keeping talent. It works best when it's authentic and perennial; when you clearly believe in it and demonstrate it daily in your actions with the people you want on your team.

About Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans
Award-winning authors of *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* and *Love It, Don't Leave It: 26 Ways to Get What You Want at Work*, Kaye and Jordan-Evans are internationally sought-after consultants, speakers, and interview subjects. They have addressed thousands of audiences on retention and engagement topics since the first edition of the *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* book was published in 1999.

Beverly Kaye is founder and CEO of Career Systems International, an international leader in delivering employee engagement, retention and development solutions. www.CareerSystemsIntl.com

Sharon Jordan-Evans, president of the Jordan Evans Group, is a sought-after keynote presenter for Fortune 500 companies and serves as an executive coach to top tier leaders. www.jeg.org

