



LEADERTHOUGHT

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Thoughtful Approaches to Powerful Leadership

Protecting the People Inside Your Business in Tough Times

Conditions have changed yet again. For many years, we have all heard that “the only thing constant is change.” Whoever coined that phrase didn’t know how right on the mark she was in her prophecy. The current economic crisis has created a whole new level of stress for most people. The “out-of-control feelings” are running rampant. Over 2.8 million U.S. workers have received “pink slips” in the past 12 months. Large and small businesses continue to disappear at unprecedented rates. The trends will continue. Stressed enough?

The economy continues to stress business owners, leaders and employees in every sector. A primary focus ought to be protecting your people in these tough times. Why? (1) Because you need everyone focused on performance and fully engaged to keep everyone (you & them) in business and (2) when times get better, you don’t want a revolving door of valuable employees going somewhere else. ***One of the most important retention factors is that employees need to TRUST that you have their best interests at heart.***

The Chinese group two symbols together: one for crisis and one for opportunity. Where there is crisis, there is opportunity around the corner. Max Anderson, in *Finding Joy*, stated, “Sometimes in the winds of change, we find our true direction.” Paraphrasing some thoughts from President’s Obama’s inaugural speech, *...there are gathering clouds and raging storms yet to come but success comes from those who stay faithful to their mission. We need to make tough choices guided by our mission and vision, not lower our sights.*

What’s needed to deal with the external chaos that stresses our employees as well as us is internal grounding, a “ready-**aim**-fire” strategy focused on your business Core (mission, vision & values) instead of the usual “ready-**fire**-aim” approach of the past. My experience working with companies in tough times has been that leaders tend to “throw everything against the wall” to see what sticks instead of having an even greater focus on a clear mission and making decisions accordingly.

I want you to remember three words:

1. Create: Focus and direction

2. Connect: All actions to the focus and direction

3. Communicate: Communicate! Communicate! Communicate! Information provides a sense of control. Employees are walking on eggshells wondering if they will still have a job. Be honest. Communicate the good, the bad and the ugly.

Here are 10 steps for a ready-aim-fire approach for not only surviving but also thriving in today’s economic crisis, including protecting your people. You not only need to look at the road immediately in front of you but also anticipate the next curve so you don’t drive off the cliff.

- 1. Focus.** Create and be clear about your company’s mission (what business you are in), the vision (where you are taking the company), and the values (how you want to conduct business). Stop throwing everything against the wall to see what sticks.
- 2. Conduct a current assessment** of your company to figure out strengths and weaknesses, what’s working and what’s not. Develop the top few priorities on which to focus. (There’s that word, *focus*, again!) Keep what’s important. Get rid of trivia, unimportant activities that create stress and diffuse energy and resources.
- 3. Make sure that you have the right leadership** for your company and that they understand their dual role. The right leaders are those who can negotiate the rapids of the current crisis while also focusing on the next curve. Can you?
- 4. Always start with the customer.** While the tendency is to look inward during a crisis, the correct place to start is with your customers. How is the current economic crisis affecting them? What do they need from you? (You may not be able to accommodate the request but merely asking nurtures the relationship.) Quality customer service is the differentiator between maybe surviving and thriving. Taking care of your customers *is* protecting

your employees. You are only in business as long as you have customers. Employees have jobs only as long as you are in business.

5. Create a **plan** for now, dealing with the current situation (the high fires), and one for the next curve. Ensure that they are flexible and adaptable for changing conditions. Review them often.
6. Develop both leading and lagging **business measures**. Lagging indicators such as revenue and profitability are an “after the fact look” about which you can do nothing. Leading indicators such as customer satisfaction and improved processes let you know if you are on the right track. Again, reviewing them often is more critical in this economy.
7. Continually improve your **processes** using customer feedback. Ask the question, “How easy is to do business with our company?” Think *innovation*. It is the stuff of the second curve.
8. Hire and keep great **employees**. They are the difference between surviving and thriving. If you think giving them a paycheck is the motivator, you might be right for the current economic crisis. However, get ready to see the revolving door when the economy improves.
9. Even in tough times, it’s important to remember the imprint you leave on the **earth’s resources and in the community**. Leave a small imprint on the earth by working toward the goal of less waste (and it often saves your business money). Leave a large imprint in the community by staying involved through volunteerism and philanthropy. In both cases, every contribution helps. It is also a great way to provide professional development. Many employees, particularly the younger generations in the workforce, care about what’s called “Corporate Social Responsibility,” and look to work in those types of companies.
10. In the end analysis, create a “**BLC**” **culture** using the preceding steps. Create ways to foster a sense of **belonging** for employees. Provide continuous **learning** for them so they can help your company thrive. Lastly, show appreciation for employee’s **contributing** to the success of your company.

Take control of your company in today’s chaotic economy. Provide focus & direction, talk to your customers, and create the right environment for employees. By following the ten steps, it will allow you to not just survive but also thrive. It’s protects your employees in tough times and it’s just smart business.