

Leading Through Enduring White Water: Three Powerful Strategies

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We are all experiencing unprecedented challenges in our organizations and it looks like this could continue for quite some time. During times of complexity, stress and change, effective leadership really matters. You cannot rise above the quality of leadership in an organization - it delimits to power and options a company has. Now more than ever, we need our leaders to rise to the moment, meet the challenges and boldly take us into an uncertain future.

Over the past 25 years we have worked closely with leaders in the corporate and non-profit world as they have successfully navigated through difficult times. We have seen leaders draw on their ability to cut a clear path for decisive action through high levels of uncertainty no matter what the circumstances: bankruptcy, lawsuits, horrific accidents, natural disasters, deep and bloody budget cuts, ethics charges and plummeting stock prices. All rather ugly, all difficult, all consuming.

The following three strategies have been sourced from our work with clients in trying times. They are counter-intuitive, yet very effective.

Don't hunker down:

In the face of pervasive stress, senior leaders often react by isolating themselves with a select few decision makers and attempt to manage the complexity of the crisis. Unfortunately, this strategy rarely works. Nobody, repeat nobody, is that smart anymore. You need more ideas, heads and hearts at the table - not fewer.

This cocoon approach cuts the leader off from their people, different perspectives, better ideas, creative approaches and new information. In their effort to contain and control the situation, they often dig themselves a deeper hole. They fall into the trap of either/or thinking (it has to be Option A or Option B) rather than looking for creative solutions. All the while, their people wonder what is wrong and whether the situation is much worse than they have been told.

When and if leaders emerge with an "answer" to the crisis, people rarely understand the thinking behind the decisions and don't trust the solution because they had no say in the matter and begin to complain, vent their anger and lose faith.

This does not mean leaders shouldn't be making important decisions because, at the end of the day, that's what they get paid to do.

It does mean that leaders need to stay open to the ideas of others, actively seek diverse perspectives, and test their ideas with others - especially those who think differently and communicate, communicate, communicate with their people and their customers. When people don't get information, they assume the worst. You want to avoid this.

One example: In the face of increasing economic pressures, a financial services company decided to use the stress the markets were exhibiting to mount a branding campaign. Their thinking was that it was easy to sell their products in an up market, but the downturn created a greater sense of awareness about what people need - a perfect time to understand how to market the company in good times and in bad. This approach enables them to see and leverage opportunity where others did not.

Hunkering down is a natural reaction to complexity and chaos. Endeavor to stay open, seek ideas and information.

Build community and connection:

In times of stress and change, people need to see their leaders and interact with them. Being “seen” can involve face-to-face meetings with key influencers, large group presentations with Q&A, office visits, video conferences, even informative e-mail notes from the leader on a regular basis. Create opportunities for people to ask questions and respond honestly - “opening up” the organization so that critical information is exchanged in a fluid way. Bottom line: keep front and center.

Celebrate small successes if you can because if people don't see anything positive, they will quickly lose hope. If there is an award or recognition you can give for good performance, achieving an important goal or implementing a cost saving process, publicly acknowledge this.

Keep company rituals if you can.

Many organizations have a monthly bowling night or brown bag lunches. Keep these important organizational events going and attend when you can. Rituals and traditions can help create some sense of normalcy during the whitewater we all face. If you don't have any of these kinds of traditions, invent them! Set up some occasion for people to get together, celebrate in some way and enjoy themselves.

Evaluate your decisions carefully - your people will be especially attuned to whether leaders are making decisions that connect to company values. Right now, the chaos and confusion of the current situation can cause people to have a greater need to believe in the leadership and in the company, but they may be paralyzed in ways that prevent them from seeing that leaders are in control and that the company does retain its fundamental identity and principles. So making and communicating decisions and how they relate to company values is especially important. One example: a company had to make difficult decisions about raises and bonuses given a tough economic climate. Because they were a life insurance company whose brand and values were founded in the long term future, their leaders made the decision to reduce this year's bonuses and not to touch the contributions to the 401 K plan. People didn't like it, but they understood the tradeoffs and why they were being made.

Listen carefully to your people. This is often more difficult than it sounds. Ron Heifetz of Harvard tells us that most leaders “die with their mouths open”. This is not the time for pronouncements and speeches. Listening authentically conveys respect and value to your people and gives you access to information leaders rarely hear. When people feel valued, they will share their concerns; more importantly, they will communicate their hopes and aspirations. With these, you can build a future.

Build capacity and invest in your people: Many senior leaders understand the value of developing junior leaders when times are flush. But when things get difficult, leadership development can be one of the first things to go. Investing in your leadership during trying times can be one of the most strategic things you can do.

For example: one of our clients had scheduled an intense, off-site leadership development program for high-potentials. Many senior leaders wanted to cancel the program until “things got better”. The president said that these are our best and brightest and we need them up to speed as soon as possible. He pared down the program (e.g. had it conducted locally rather than off-site, saving travel and hotel costs) and publicly committed to it in a memo to his people. The responses he received about the decision were overwhelmingly positive.

Leaders can take advantage of what is right in front of them by using real work assignments to build the capacity of emerging leaders. Coaching opportunities are everywhere during difficult times. Almost everywhere you look is an opportunity for someone to grow, develop and contribute to the bottom line. Invest in coaching.

Mentoring talent across the organization is essential at this time. Senior leaders need to model the way by reaching out to potential leaders and developing a mentoring relationships with them. One caveat: when people choose someone to mentor, be careful of the “comfortable cloning” syndrome. This is when we choose to work with someone who is very similar to us, someone “comfortable”. The best thing might be to reach out and mentor someone different than us.

Organize “best practice” sessions where your people can share what they are doing well with each other. These could be ways to motivate employees, cut costs, improve a process or share resources across divisions. We have found that most people are willing to share their ideas with others. The added bonus is that these events don’t cost anything; all you need is a room, some willing people and time to share ideas.

Audit for Tough Times: 5 Key Questions.

As a leader, there are basic skills that you have likely learned to enhance the performance of the company and its people. But times are different. It’s time to be more disciplined and focused on the arsenal of activities and approaches that work in tough times.

The 5 key questions leaders need to ask themselves during difficult times:

1. What do our people need (e.g. information, connection, listening)?
2. Are we living our corporate values?
3. Are we visible, accessible and communicative?
4. What’s coming down the pike? How can I look at the “horizon” issue and anticipate possible futures?
5. Are we using this time to learn, grow, share and build our capacity?