



WHAT GREAT LEADERS DO BEST

Play to win

By George Kohlrieser - July 2009

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Survival mode involves only a limited amount of energy and opportunistic thinking – and it is up to leaders to inspire oft over-extended, frustrated people and help them to see the opportunities that come with any crisis.

In order to lead the switch from the prevailing negative mindset to the idea that we are poised for a recovery, leaders need to “lead at the edge” – or – in other words, lead the way to a positive mindset and a state of inspired energy.

This all sounds great on paper but when the harsh reality consists of a daily diet of laying off people and cutting costs, moving into a state of “inspired energy” presents a challenge for any leader – particularly one surrounded by people laced with pain and anticipated loss. How does one person inspire others in such an environment?

Playing to win

Moving forward requires a mindset change and that means taking control by strengthening one’s resolve to “play to win”. The first step is for leaders to actively understand the pain that they and their people are going through. With this empathic state, leaders can then direct employees to look towards the benefits and opportunities often buried within a crisis. Playing to win requires good risk assessment, a clear game plan and most importantly, the ability to inspire people through knowledge and new ideas to join the ride.

Leaders who can genuinely help people to see that “a change has a benefit” can turn “being a hostage” and being helpless into an active engagement. This is what it means to “play to win.” The opposite is focusing on fear and avoidance of pain which is then in fact “playing not to lose.”

What makes a great leader?

Any leader who has not worked on his or herself will have difficulties to lead properly. Great leaders start with themselves – understanding their own foundations and being aware of their secure bases (the people, places, events, experiences, beliefs etc which have shaped them). Only from this point can one become focused on external goals and then aspire to take the fear out of others.

Great leaders are secure-bases to others with an ingrained sense of confidence in themselves. They are not overwhelmed by fear and do not fall prey to helplessness that could only be destructive to themselves and those around them. Great leaders are rarely taken hostage and are not afraid of argumentation or people pushing back. Secure-base leaders are not afraid to make decisions based on the input of others, including their adversaries. Accepting valuing and seeing the potential in individuals is intrinsic to them. Great leaders do not use threats, nor communicate with an over-emphasis on danger. Great leaders understand the importance of risk assessment – and possess the ability to take calculated risks. They also have two fundamental characteristics:

1. Power and the ability to use it positively to impact both themselves and others

Part of this implies following the Lincoln philosophy of “teams of rivals”, or, in other words, engaging potential enemies and winning them over as allies so that they bring in people with different ideas who will challenge the status quo. This approach ensures the most vibrant potential for innovation and new ideas.

2. Influence

Ironically, by the time leaders have achieved complete formal authority, the successful ones are those who then use informal authority – influence – to make things happen rather than by exerting their hierarchical power. They are able to influence others through powerful dialogue, seeking a greater truth by thinking together.

Reclaiming your power

There are many great stories of teams and individuals who have made something good out of the worst possible crises. A crisis – with its ability to raise questions about what really is important and where an individual or an organization is really going - can sometimes be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. A crisis can also be the cloud with the silver lining. In order to handle crises and their intrinsic questions, leaders must be able to reclaim their own power and enable those around them to do the same.

Taking back the power can take many forms. It could entail organizations go back to their core values or products or ways of doing things that suited them better or contrarily innovate and

move in a completely different direction. It could mean figuring out what new talents will be needed in the future. It may involve developing emotional intelligence as a leader; being better at business processes; expanding knowledge in business areas or going into new professional arenas. In a retrenchment situation, taking back the power might mean contacting people in your social network or exploring entrepreneurship possibilities. Trusted friends can play a key support role in a transition.

Anybody who has suffered a major loss – whether it is a personal or professional one – knows that people, supported by others, can have an extraordinary resilience to bounce back from even the most unthinkable crises. It simply requires the emotional and technical skills to do so. The current world financial crisis is no different.

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