

Time for leadership courage

by **Stephen Langton**, Global Practice Managing Partner, Leadership Consulting

Few champagne corks fly from the balconies of corporate headquarters these days.

Those privileged enough to celebrate a business success do so discreetly. For too many years we have taught ourselves that the money would never run out, that we were more powerful and intelligent than the markets, that resource limitation was another person's problem.

That myth ended. It is time to work again. A box on the wall houses the word 'Leadership'. On its front are the words: 'In Emergency Break Glass'. Courage in leadership has come back into fashion.

Courage. It is one of the very few words that we still use with care in our modern business lexicon. So many human qualities are lazily cited and misused in business books and articles. There is no doubt that in the top echelons of business you will find strong strategic managers, but only a few senior business leaders truly possess courage. These are the individuals who people look to for more than instruction – they give hope, belief, faith and strength.

Arguably down a mine or on an oil platform, in truly unpredictable environments of personal risk, there has been and continues to be the opportunity for strong, resolute leadership. But in the City? If a CEO makes a decision that collapses the market capitalization of their company overnight, every single employee will still come into work the next day, and go home safely at the end of it. Little more has been demanded of corporate leaders than the ability to tell individuals what they have to do, how it will be measured and how they will be paid for it.

Until now. Until the business environment lurched and shifted and faithful employees were taken a rung down Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Until our certainty of being able to afford the lives we lead began to slip, and beliefs about our job security started to blur. When our national leaders describe the economic crisis alongside words like 'survive', 'protect', and 'hope', we know that nimble management alone will not see us through.

It is times such as these when, finally, leadership becomes critical; when we realize whether we are well led or not. New leaders emerge from apparently

competent managers and existing leaders are unmasked as frauds; unable to communicate, calm and rally their people. It is good leadership which determines whether the entire workforce emerges demoralized or engaged.

Most organizations have defined leadership capability lists that sound powerful but would be barely recognized as important in environments where real leadership is required, for example: 'commercial insight', 'innovation and creativity', 'strategic thinking', 'customer insight', 'cooperation', 'change leader'. It is indicative that in the corporate world we have to define leadership values and principles. In environments which truly require leadership, its presence or absence is absolutely clear.

The difference is courage. Moral courage. The courage to feel fearful but to present confidence and hope; to be honest and lead with truth. The courage to make decisions for your people not for yourself. The courage to challenge the principles, behaviors and values that created the status quo. The courage to be true to yourself and lead when it can be the loneliest position in the organization.

Have courage, real courage

Courage is not about being the most fearless, nor is it about being the toughest. It is about acting despite fear. It is moral courage; not the courage that hides behind aggression, authority or title. If you have enjoyed being perceived as an aggressive, socially withdrawn leader during the good times, there is no room to indulge in this theatre now. There may come a time when your organization will once again be healthy enough for you to entertain yourself with aggressive leadership behaviors.

But it is not today. Employees and their managers need calm, focus, clarity, personal courage and real leadership.

Communicate to create clarity

Our worst fear is nothing more than the unknown. A child is not frightened of the dark but what the dark might hide. Be honest with your people. Tell them what you do and do not know and ask them to share what they know. When you do not have anything to tell them then tell them that. Focus on what is important to them not you. Employ diverse mediums – the media, rumor, employee and customer magazines – and lose the jargon: now is not the time to gild your words.

Make imperfect decisions

There is no time for the irrational quest for perfection that creates stalled momentum. Understand you need to make imperfect decisions because the perfect decision does not exist. Momentum and activity towards progress are more important than the inertia of perfecting the plan. There is no room for passive security needs here. Ensure momentum and break inertia. If you have people with the drive to make decisions then encourage this rather than testing and disqualifying them in your own need for the 'right' answer.

Be present, be seen

A letter home from a British foot guard following the Battle of Waterloo shared that when his regiment had been decimated and only a few men stood to protect the colors on the line, through the smoke

of battle he saw Wellington, sitting on his horse just yards behind them. He had come forward to evaluate the situation before returning to the hill. In this moment those remaining soldiers reported a surge in confidence and belief, along with a desire not to let the old man down. They chose not to die that day. They lasted until the reserves relieved them.

Though you may be angry, depressed and confused, this is not the time to show it. This is the moment to get amongst your people for as much time as you can. Answer their questions. Be approachable. Control the whispering word of mouth yourself, and do it throughout the organization. Set up a blog to receive feedback. People are looking for evidence to be alarmed. Do not let your distance or your countenance be one of them.

Don't criticize

This is not the time to berate for past mistakes or dwell. Keep your mind focused on the future. Recognize the opportunity this situation gives to operate more efficiently and ask your people to define how. Set new goals but not new instructions. If the boom times have enabled management levels to take the initiative and embrace freedom of action then use this to solve the problems; avoid reverting to solving their problems for them. Forgive those who falter initially; they are probably doing the best they can.

Manage yourself

Get used to wearing some heavy 'L' plates on your back again for a while. You are an impostor; you have told yourself this every day since the market changed. An army mantra for leadership in crisis

reminds us that officers should never run because it panics the men. Manage anxiety. Believe in yourself. Focus on the higher intent of the organization rather than the last dollar saved. Smile. Make time for people.

Be made of Teflon. Seek feedback. Set up sentinels. Make time for selfish needs.

Be available. Be personal. The use of the word 'I' is less of a taboo in a crisis.

Be the colors. The rallying point in the smoke and noise of battle, reassuring your troops that hope prevails. Never let the colors fall. Apportion credit and take blame.

Show that sacrifices are shared. Are you going to fly business class to visit one of your offices to tell them that they have to cut costs? Do you park among your staff in a brand new Mercedes?

Learn, unlearn, relearn

Make sure you are informed. Read the newspapers. Read your company blog sites. Be a source of knowledge and promote the news that gives cause for optimism. Seek support beyond your organization; reach out to other CEOs. Find someone with whom you can share your concerns, who will not judge you and who will benefit in return.

There will come a day for giving up and indulging in self pity. But it is not this day. Not while you have people around you who need to believe in you and find that spark of faith.

True leadership at last has the chance to bloom in our privileged corporate universe. Leadership based on faith, purpose, honor and with courage at its heart. ■

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