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LEADING YOUR TEAM THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES

By Ted Stoa • The Village Business Institute

When business is great with no bumps in the road, everyone’s a leader. It’s when times are tough that the great leaders take a step forward out of necessity and a duty to perform. A difficult business climate provides an opportunity for the effective and inspiring leader to perform at his or her very best.

Business success is all about people. This fact is even more visible when an organization is going through a period of economic uncertainty or other business-related turmoil. Why? Because it’s natural for morale, motivation, and commitment to suffer in bad times. Your people naturally worry about their jobs, and have a tendency to become paralyzed by fear. That’s when your people need you to lead.

Your people deserve to have great leadership – a servant leader. Someone who leads by example, doesn’t drive by mandate, and ultimately coaches and empowers the team to a level of productivity seemingly unattainable. As Winston Churchill once said, “Difficulties mastered are opportunities won.”

What is your mission and vision? More importantly, what are your core values? These are the bedrock values upon which your company and people must operate from. In today’s business environment, it’s to be expected that your plans and strategies will change as time goes on. The flexibility for rapid change and the ability to continuously improve is a competitive advantage, and often necessary for survival. However, no matter how intense the pressure for immediate profits are, do not compromise on your core values.

The late David Packard, cofounder of Hewlett Packard, described HP core values this way: “The Hewlett-Packard Company believes the best results come when you...
get the right people, trust them, give them freedom to find the best path to achieve objectives, and let them share in the rewards their work makes possible.” He also stated, “We practice integrity, period.”

Core values communicate to everyone what is important, thus influencing overall behavior. They are the timeless guiding principles that enable leaders to make the “right” decisions in times of turmoil and chaos. Former Johnson and Johnson (J&J) CEO James Burke, at the beginning of the cyanide-laced Tylenol capsule incident, immediately called for the removal of all Tylenol capsules from store shelves. The action cost J&J many millions of dollars in inventory. In this very stressful situation, Mr. Burke naturally reverted to the core values contained in the document called “The Credo.” These values have guided the company for over a hundred years of business. He didn’t wait for the legal team to weigh the options; he took the right actions and saved lives. Although J&J sales initially suffered dramatically, over time his leadership, based on the company core values, saved the company.

Great leaders listen and involve their people in decisions and plans. When tackling complex problems, involve and engage your team in the process. Diversity of thought is a tool you can use to your advantage as a leader in arriving at the “best” solution to a complex issue. None of us is as smart as all of us!

Be positive, open, and honest as you lead your team. Constantly raise the bar while always celebrating others’ success and giving credit where it is due. Show you care about your people by doing the little things that demonstrate it. Smile, ask about a child, write a personal note of thanks, etc.

Practice these principles and you will continue to lead your team successfully into the future.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Strive to be a servant leader
- Stay true to core values
- Engage your staff in problem-solving
- Be honest and caring
Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi used to say that you should chase perfection even though you know you’ll never catch it, because if you chase perfection you will catch excellence. He left something out.

Great leaders know that you may catch excellence but you don’t get to hold it for long. Excellence tears itself out of your grasp and races on ahead. The truth is, that excellence, in leadership or anything else, is not a one-and-done thing. If you are excellent and you want to remain excellent, you cannot remain the same, you must keep getting better.

So, how do excellent leaders do that? They do three things.

**CURIOSITY IS A MARVELOUS TEACHER**

Yogi Berra said that, “You can observe a lot just by watching.” Great leaders have insatiable curiosity. Because of that, they often learn a lot without setting out to “learn” anything.

Great leaders scoop up ideas and observations and lessons from everywhere. Many leaders do that by reading, including reading novels and poetry. Some leaders dig deep into history and biography. Often, you won’t know what you’ve learned until you need it.

When you’re curious about a lot of things, you can’t help learning. You learn from things you see on television and conversations in the supermarket line and a glance at the morning news. The special value of this kind of learning is that you get observations and ideas from outside your normal realm of activity. Those ideas are the ones most likely to be breakthroughs.

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You can’t always leave learning to chance. Sometimes you must concentrate your efforts to learn a lot about a single subject. When my friend Geoff’s company acquired a German company, he set out to learn everything he could about Germany, German culture, and the German way of doing business.

He read books and took language classes. He reached out to other Americans who had experience dealing with Germans and with Germans who had experience dealing with Americans. That was just one example of his lifelong learning habit.

Geoff was always studying something. He studied opera because a key client was an opera lover. He learned basic programming way before anyone thought it was cool. When his daughter started playing soccer, he immersed himself in the sport.

In the process of studying many subjects, Geoff increased his store of general knowledge. Having a rich storehouse of learning helps you see possibilities that others miss and understand situations that others don’t.

No matter what you may have heard, we do not learn from experience, at least not automatically. We only learn from experience if we isolate the lessons to be learned and then consume them. It’s as if our experience sets the table for learning, but we get to choose which dishes we will have. Great leaders learn from their experience in two ways.

Great leaders try to learn from every operation. Some of them do this with a formal event that goes by various names, including “after-action critique.” Leaders conduct review sessions with their team after important events and projects. For this to work, the session must be about learning and not about fixing blame. People need to feel safe admitting that they could have done things better.

The team asks and answers a series of questions about what the plan was and how the real events differed from the plan. They ask and answer questions about exactly who did what and when and how things could be done better next time.

Many great leaders conduct their own, personal version of an after-action critique. Some review their performance at the end of every day to determine how they could do things better. Others do the same thing, but on a weekly basis. Still others use another timeframe or make the after-action review a habit that is triggered by any situation that had surprising results.

Great leaders are never done getting better. They learn from satisfying their curiosity. They learn from directed projects to master a subject. They learn by reflecting on their experience. Great leaders are usually not smarter than their peers, but they work harder at learning.

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