

# Three Leadership Disciplines for Achieving *Breakthrough* During Turbulent Times

*If you didn't prepare for this downturn, it's  
not too late for a competitive surge*

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It is amusing to sift through business articles published in early 2008. Financial storms were not on the horizon for most prognosticators. Instead, "talent shortage" was the catchy phrase as writers lamented the anticipated heated competition for star performers. The supply of an available, employable workforce was expected to lag significantly behind the projected demand created by a robust economy. Boomers retiring in record numbers would add to the problem.

What a difference a few quarters make! Now we wonder if a trillion dollar stimulus package—with its gyrating mix of tax cuts and spending—will be enough to pull us through a deepening recessionary period.

An economic downturn does not

necessarily bring out the best in last year's top performers.

Challenging times do however clearly bring out who the best managers are. It's a lot easier to lead and manage when you are floating atop a rising market tide and quite another matter to swim through a whirlpool of market downturns. Those clear-headed, insightful managers who prepared for this day are the clear winners right about now. Do you know who those managers are in your company? Are you investing in their continued development?

Assuming you or your company did not prepare as well as you would have liked to for the present downturn, what can be done now to "change the game" in your favor? Are breakthrough improvements still possible? Do

you have managers who can successfully motivate and empower employees? Is your organization in peril of being left behind when your industry rebounds?

If you were not looking and planning for today four quarters ago—or if you were, and you just

## QUICK LOOK

- Assuming you did not prepare as well as you would have liked to for the present downturn, three leadership disciplines can help you "change the game" in your favor
- The road to breakthrough starts with a cool, calm, and concise summary of the current status of the business
- People need straight talk to move forward in a productive manner
- An effective leader in a time of crisis has a clear vision and is obsessed with enrolling others in the vision
- "Tease out" the actions for success and discover "low-hanging" innovations

didn't see this foul economic wind coming join the crowd! We estimate less than 10% of an organization's managers know how to forecast accurately. Even fewer know how to communicate negative news effectively.

As a result of current cost-cutting, downsizings, hiring freezes or early retirements, companies may find themselves with vacancies that are difficult to work around.

In some cases, employees who were assigned to a critical task or team may have been terminated, laid off, or on a layoff list. Remaining workers are often given more work while wages are frozen and they can be left with sagging spirits. These feelings can result in workplace languor, increased absences, health issues and other productivity-killers.

Consultants or contract help who were contributing to organizational efforts may also be slashed from the budget. The bottom line remains the same: fewer employees wearing more hats. And so a new challenge presents itself: What is the most effective way to "breakthrough" the turbulence caused by this type of economic maelstrom?

We offer three leadership disciplines for achieving breakthroughs during turbulent times.

### **DISCIPLINE ONE:**

***Prepare and communicate an honest and concise assessment of what is going on***

Most of us believe that great leaders are great communicators. This is especially true in times

of economic uncertainty. The road to breakthrough starts with a cool, calm, and concise summary of the current status of the business. People need straight talk to move forward in a productive manner. It does little good to start with a vision or plan if associates do not believe their leader(s) "get it".

*Good strategies don't create competitive advantage. The ability to execute them does.*

The first discipline is clearly communicating the nightmare

of your current business reality. Yes, we said: Nightmare. These are difficult times. This is our reality, our current situation. (By the way, this will hardly be late breaking news to your associates – they know the conditions that surround and threaten to consume them).

Communication about the current situation requires a point of view from these five perspectives:

**1. Associate morale and engagement**—now is actually the best time to take a "pulse survey" of the associate population. This will provide the most accurate insight into the associates' perceptions and their ideas for improvement

**2. Customer loyalty**—if you are in danger of losing customers, talk about it. Stick to the facts and get the dialogue going about the best way to stay close to key accounts

**3. Market or industry position**—share where you stand and where you want to be

**4. Operational efficiency**—highlight efforts in this area and again, share both the good and bad news regarding current efficiency levels and trends

**5. Financial condition**—be honest about the numbers. Be sure everyone understands their role in contributing to the financial success of the business

### **DISCIPLINE TWO:**

***Given the situation, prepare and communicate a vision of success***

An effective leader in a time of crisis has a clear vision and is obsessed with enrolling others in the vision. He or she communicates this vision in a manner that moves employees. A vision is all about destination. It's about movement with a purpose. A financial goal may be a large part of your destination but a vision is not about money alone. To paraphrase Peter Drucker, "Profit is the reward for doing business right."

A good vision is grounded in reality. A great vision is grounded in reality and is aspirational. Other critical components of your vision during turbulent times:

- ***A vision has to inspire people. It is only inspirational if they believe it can be achieved***
- ***A better future must be described in vivid detail and contrasted with the current nightmare scenario***
- ***Your vision doesn't have to be everything you believe in—just the most important thing***

### **DISCIPLINE THREE:**

***"Tease out" the actions for success and discover "low-hanging" innovations***

With a good grasp of the current situation and a compelling vision

of the future, you might be tempted to take the next logical step and design a plan of action. This is a serious error that will hinder moving toward the vision. It will stifle creative ideas your associates might have.

It's actually more advantageous if you do not have a clue about getting to the "better place". You stop being alone in getting to that better place as soon as you convince others to go there too. Your people will help you get there if they believe it's a great place to be and if they see you committed to leading the way.

This third leadership discipline places the burden on the leader. He or she must create the "percolating environment" for new and innovative actions that drive the business toward the vision. The plans and ideas for the future already exist in the minds of managers, teams, and individual associates. Michelangelo said it best: "The idea is there locked inside you. All you have to do is remove the excess stone".


These are the questions leaders ask when teasing out actions to tackle challenges:

- What "low-hanging" innovations can we come up with—how can we use existing resources more effectively and creatively?
- Given a finite amount of resources, where are we likely to gain the most improvement?
- How do we enlist the help and support of more people as we work toward the vision?

A word of caution as you put the three disciplines to work for positive change and breakthrough. How you enact and embrace the disciplines is critically important.

Your enthusiasm must lead to enthusiasm others feel. Your energy must lead to increased team and individual associate energy. Bestselling business author John Kotter puts it this way:

*"People change less because of facts or data that shifted their thinking than because compelling experiences changed their feelings."*

You may have winning ideas. But you need energized people on your side to win the game. 

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*"The trouble with the future is that it usually arrives before we're ready for it"*

*-A. Glasgow*

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