Leadership During Challenging Times
by Mark David

With today’s economy, the need for leadership excellence is at an all-time high.

The experienced leader knows that business does not simply go up and stay up. Over time business goes up and down; it fluctuates with the economy. Common strategies for dealing with economic slowdowns include cutting overhead, downsizing and most importantly, increasing productivity. As downsizing occurs to keep organizations afloat, the people who remain must increase productivity with:

• fewer people and resources
• tighter deadlines and
• sometimes less pay

As a leader it is important to be a role model for handling these challenges and the accompanying stress in a proactive rather than reactive manner.

The bottom line to an organization’s survival and success depends on leadership’s ability to:

• create the correct business strategies to navigate to the correct destination
• ensure that everyone is on the same page working in harmony toward the same goals
• maximize the productivity of every employee each day, each hour, each minute and keep everyone in the organization energized and focused
• communicate gratitude for each team member’s skills and contribution

Look back over your own experience or research how businesses have thrived during previous economic slowdowns. Learn from your experiences as well as others, both good and bad. Knowledge is a tool for developing successful strategies and avoiding pitfalls. Encourage your team to do the same and to experiment within the realm of common sense. Innovation and flexibility are integral to achieving greater productivity with fewer resources. Challenging times test our character, creativity and innovation. Challenging times tell us who we really are.
I’d like to share four proven strategies with you to increase productivity and realize success during challenging times.

Strategy #1: Broadcast Your Vision to Your Organization
You must create a "vision" for your organization. Broadcast your vision to all employees on a regular basis.

Winning organizations start each year with a vision in mind. Make sure it is defined and presented for everyone to understand. The key to your employees clearly understanding the vision is consistency. Find ways to communicate your vision on a daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly basis. This consistency is extremely motivating and is the core of building a high-performance organization.

Broadcast your vision by pre-planning a quarterly communication campaign. Here are some ways to implement your campaign:

- Leave voicemails reiterating the vision and update employees on their progress toward achieving it. Congratulate them on their efforts and challenge them further.
- Send e-mails that include employees’ success stories and current events that relate to the vision.
- Create a monthly newsletter that refocuses the organization on the vision and recognizes outstanding contributions, sacrifices, etc. This newsletter should be short, to the point and high-impact.
- Interview customers and create audio/video recordings to share with employees. This gives employees a larger scope to which they can relate their efforts.
- Schedule regular employee meetings to discuss the status of the vision and each employee’s efforts toward achieving it.

By creating a vision, you focus your people on the goal rather than on how challenging it will be to reach the goal in the current marketplace. Focus on the positive. Motivate during tough economic times by providing crystal clear direction.

**Strategy #2: Tell Your Organization What You Expect**

Tell your organization what is expected from everyone. It is extremely important that you clearly communicate what needs to be done, when it needs to be completed, what it should look like when it’s done, and how it will affect the organization both vertically and horizontally. If you want everyone in the organization on the same page, everyone must understand the organization’s vision and his or her part in achieving it.

Never assume that your employees know what you are thinking. As basic as it sounds, you must tell them what you expect. Be specific. You can light the path they need to take by providing clear direction. Tell them how you expect them to perform their jobs. Also, provide the action steps they need to take in order to reach their goals. State your expectations in a positive manner -- if you focus on the negative, they will only hear negative.
Setting clear expectations from the beginning prevents employee turnover. During the hiring process, provide candidates with a clear job description outlining the daily activities expected of them. Once hired, tell them what is expected during the first 90 days. Also, outline the skills they need to develop in order to reach the next level in their career path. This is also an effective technique to use with long-time employees. Economic slowdowns can cause fear, but clarity provides the stability and security that employees need and seek.

Once you think they’ve got it, ask for feedback. If necessary, review the expectations again. Increased clarity leads to a greater release of total human potential. If your organization knows what you expect, they will focus all of their energy, emotion and intelligence into performing up to your expectations. This concentrated effort will enable them to achieve more in less time. During these economic times, there is no time for mistakes due to miscommunication. Tell your people exactly what you expect so that they will know what their role is in the success of the organization.

**Strategy #3: Focus on the “Top 20% Responsibilities”**

Once you broadcast your vision and ensure that everyone knows the specific role that they are expected to perform, it is especially important that they understand what their "Top 20% Responsibilities" are and how they affect the success of the entire organization.

One of the biggest problems in business today is lack of time. Your organization’s success depends on your ability to consistently make the correct choice of how to efficiently spend your time and to develop this ability within your employees. *Top 20% Responsibilities* are the main areas of responsibility that bring the organization the greatest results on a daily basis. Having each employee stay focused on their area will enable the organization to meet and exceed goals.

This type of focus is the key to mastering time management. Focusing on individual *Top 20% Responsibilities* will keep your employees on track and prevent them from falling into activity traps that are time wasters. If you were to assign a value to each responsibility, the *Top 20%* would earn $100 an hour while activity traps (or low pay-off activities) would be worth just $5, $10 or $20 an hour. So, every time you or one of your employees performs one of these low pay-off activities during the day, you are losing between $80 and $95 each hour.

To be a successful leader, your *Top 20% Responsibilities* should include strategic thinking, creating a proactive culture, communication, growing and developing your employees, and prospecting for future employees. Remember to take time each evening to pre-plan the next day and be sure to schedule a majority of your time on your *Top 20% Responsibilities*. This will ensure that you maximize your time every day.
Economic slowdowns demand increased productivity from each individual. The only way to achieve more with fewer resources is to master time management. We need to help our people focus on high pay-off activities.

**Strategy #4: Create a Culture of "No Fear"**

To promote productivity and remain competitive, leaders must create a culture of "no fear" within organizations. A proactive environment allows people to try varied ways of improving productivity and efficiency.

"No fear" means having the freedom to bring forth ideas and honesty in a world of structure and discipline. This will open the door to creativity and innovation, and will enable you to build a high-performance organization. Employees are motivated in an atmosphere of "no fear." They are not afraid to take calculated risks, and the environment supports them in simply being themselves. This enables you to help them achieve their potential sooner.

Most people think that making a mistake is a sign of weakness (and fear management’s repercussions in doing so). Help them understand that admitting mistakes, shortcomings, or a lack of knowledge demonstrates strength. All issues are simply a part of day-to-day business and should be viewed as instruments of learning and opportunities for growth.

Teach your employees the advantages of working in a culture of "no fear." These benefits include increased productivity, rapid adjustments in decision-making, improved morale, and accelerated professional and personal growth. In addition, your employees will take more calculated risks in this type of environment, which will allow you to move your business forward. This culture empowers your organization while maintaining the positive stress of respect.

Give your people permission to talk about the effects that the economic slowdown has on their job security. Don't allow them to waste time playing out their worries over and over in their minds; encourage them to get thoughts out in the open and work through the stress. Support them by discussing how to cope proactively and reach for success during times like these.

Organizations that flourish during an economic slowdown are those that develop their employees' skill sets, thought processes, behaviors, accountability and confidence. I learned a long time ago in my first years as a business leader that correct communications and training act as remarkable long-term motivational factors for organizational success. By helping each employee become a better craftsman, your organization will be better able to weather the highs and lows of an unpredictable economy.
As leaders, we must always remember that we can’t realize our destination without our people. Give them the training they need and the opportunity to succeed, and then get out of their way! By doing so, your business will skyrocket during an economic slowdown.

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