

Leadership in Times of Uncertainty

It is nearly impossible to escape from the unending stream of negative press as the world makes its way through a financial upheaval of unprecedented magnitude. While no one can predict with confidence what will happen next, it would seem likely that daily fluctuations in the global markets will generate a sense of volatility for some time to come. It is important to note that chief executive officers and others in senior management positions have no immunity from feelings of helplessness and apprehension fostered by these events. And yet, in these extraordinary times, people turn to their leaders for guidance and reassurance more than ever before.

The prudent CEO may ask, “What can I do or say to help the people in my organization cope with what has happened and what is to come?” This question acknowledges that the dynamics of current events are unique and may need to be approached in a different way. Based on RHR’s years of experience in leading change and what we know about the behaviors of those facing times of uncertainty, we have put together our insights regarding the specific challenges you may be currently facing as a leader.

Four key concepts you may find useful when leading people during times of uncertainty are: Inform, Connect, Guide, and Unite.

Inform

As people struggle to make sense of a new situation, they are particularly hungry for information and analysis during the opening stages. For this reason, you may find that they are most open to communication efforts delivered at the onset. Seizing early opportunities to share available information can have greater impact than waiting to deliver “perfect” news at a later date.

For obvious reasons, honesty is critical in such communications. Leaders must candidly acknowledge the downsides and the unknowns. This will create credibility when painting a picture of their organization’s strengths and encouraging people to focus on the solid fundamentals. Most importantly, it is the leader’s job to help people make sense of the changing conditions, anticipate the likely scenarios ahead, and make up their own minds about how to best deal with these situations.

TIP:» Communicate early and frequently. The risk of over-communicating is far less important than leaving the field open to catastrophic rumors. Embrace humility. Tell the truth; over-promising is only likely to backfire. Emphasize that recovery is a marathon, not a sprint.

Connect

It is important to generate a feeling of trust with your employees. This will not happen if your communications appear remote or artificial. People need to feel a highly personal presence and connection. Senior executives who reach out to their employees and foster warmth and support will be seen as a credible source of reassurance and information.

On the personal side, leaders need to acknowledge that they, too, are affected. Saying it is no sign of weakness. On the contrary, it signals that they are in touch with their own feelings and with others as fellow human beings. Everyone, including senior executives, may need to seek out support – from friends, family members, mentors and counselors.

TIP:» If and when dramatic events occur, give people opportunities to safely express their emotions. Reach out to employees on a personal basis. Get out of your office and into the hallway. Be there for them. Encourage everyone to do the same.

Guide

During periods of uncertainty, more than at any other time, people want strong leaders who are comfortable giving direction on what to do and what not to do. However, too early or inconsiderate calls to “Put this behind us” and “Get back to work” will probably be counterproductive. Talking about the long-term visions and strategies of the company will not be effective when people are bracing for further bad news, or emotionally recovering from previous disclosures.

You may find it beneficial to start with more basic elements. The first step is to provide clear guidance on business-critical priorities that everyone can rally around and contribute to. As those concerns are being addressed, invite people to think of the unique skills and qualities that have kept them in business with their internal or external customers. How can they leverage those and make a difference to others who are dealing with the same issues?

TIP:» Give steady guidance. Focus on the concrete steps on which all employees can align. Empower them to be part of the solution within that framework. Patiently hammer your message – its stability may be as important as its content.

Unite

Turbulent times remind us of the importance of human community. People value it. They need to rally behind those things that bind them together. Leaders can pull their employees closer to the company by reinforcing what makes them a unique group. Chief executives can help crystallize these feelings to energize a group towards joint action. You may find that actively dealing with a difficult situation will actually enhance a sense of togetherness and resilience as a community.

The leader who taps into well-felt aspects of who people are and how they function sends a strong message in times of uncertainty: “What we’re doing now validates what we’ve always done; we can adapt to change and still be true to who we are.”

TIP:» Celebrate who you are as a business community. Emphasize connectedness to your industry, your company, your customers, and one another.

About Customers

The concepts outlined above also apply to your customers. Executives up to the highest level must not be afraid to pick up the phone and let customers know that the organization is there for them and will be of whatever help it can be. Customers need to know they have a partner who will be on their side in turbulent times.

TIP:» Reach out to your customers on a regular basis. Maintain relationships even when no concrete business is discussed.

The Importance of Leadership

In uncertain times, it is essential to bridge the conceptual difference between “leading” and “managing.” Organizations need leaders to show the way forward and instill a sense of energy and inspiration. They need the same leaders to be visibly involved, making sure that visions are translated into concrete and sensible action plans, and that those programs are actively pursued and followed through.

TIP:» Create a separate “decision room” where your management team can discuss all options frankly and flexibly, then stick to a common message towards employees and the external world.

Final Thoughts

More turbulent and rough times would appear to be ahead of us. In all probability, uncertainty will remain at high levels, exacting its toll on individuals and businesses. Because of this, the people in your organization will be looking for direction more than ever. Rising up to that challenge is the essence of individual leadership. Whatever happens, forward-looking energy, honesty and connectedness to others will be key lasting assets, valuable long after this current period of uncertainty is in the past.

RHR has found that people under stress react in predictable manners. Following is a list of behaviors you may observe in your employees in reaction to current economic events:

- Lack of focus
- Decreased productivity
- Heightened conflicts
- High increase in rumor mill output
- Increase in internal competition
- Increase in silo mentality (both in function and level)
- Reduced communication
- Delays in analysis
- Increased paranoia
- Lack of motivation
- Emotional outbursts
- Significant increase in questions (but not the Big Question)
- Frequent sick days
- Job searching at work

These behaviors are typical during times of anxiety and are impossible to eradicate. However, their effect can be mitigated by addressing the guidelines outlined in this article.