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Leading in Tough Times

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008 is in the books and 2009 is off to a very uncertain start. There are plenty of prognosticators with varying ideas of where the economy is headed and what it means for business and consumers alike. No doubt, there is good reason to be concerned for the financial well being of your company as well as employee morale as we all endure some level of tougher times. One of the most important elements any business will need to make it through these tough times is leadership. Seasoned leaders are often at their best when times are toughest and new leaders are often born from the need to overcome obstacles on their way to a goal. Here are five things good leaders will do to help get their business and employees through the current fears to better days.

First, leaders will be ready to change when necessary. Good leaders are adaptable and know that change will come and is often necessary. Change can be painful but the pain can produce good results. Just as iron sharpens iron, the friction of change helps leaders stay sharp and focused and better prepared to forge their way through the difficulties they face.

Second, leaders will have a reasonable goal for what they want to accomplish and they will communicate the goal with the people whom they lead. People generally are willing to work together, more so in times of stress or conflict, when they feel like they know what they are trying to accomplish. Setting goals and letting everyone know how they play a part will go far in making the goal a reality.

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Third, leaders will determine what they want to represent or who they want to be. In these tough times, it is more important than ever to be focused and work toward your strengths. Diversification can be a good thing when the wheels of our economy are churning, but it's better to do one or just a few things very well than to do several things with mediocrity.

Fourth, leaders will find ways to make people's jobs and effort meaningful. One of the challenges of this economy will be morale. When we turn the TV on or open the newspaper and hear about folks losing their jobs and their homes, it begins to affect everyone and we all start to think “What if?” What if it happens to me or my spouse or my children? To combat that feeling, leaders have to help people see why their jobs are worthwhile. Maybe it's because the product we are selling brings joy to someone or maybe it's because we find ways to help another employee in performing our responsibilities. Employees who believe they are working for a cause, not just a paycheck, will show up more engaged and more enthusiastic about performing to the best of their ability.

Fifth, leaders will be servants. The adage “people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care” is never truer than in rough times. Your employees want to know you care; they want to know you are willing to help them and do what you can to insure they have an opportunity to succeed.

Good leadership is not the cure-all for tough economic times, but it is certainly as important, if not more important, during hard times as it is during the good times. Effective leaders will be able to keep their employees more engaged and find ways to build on opportunity. Employees are willing to be led, they just want to know their leader cares and recognizes them, and when that occurs, they just might move mountains together.

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