

Moving Targets

Leading During Times of Uncertainty

By Joe Whitefield

I have always been fascinated with the concept of dynamics. I remember the challenge of graduating from hitting a baseball off a tee to hitting one being pitched. All of the sudden, physical coordination was not enough—there had to be a sense of timing and depth perception. As soon as I acquired some modest skills to hit a pitched baseball, the pitchers began throwing curve balls. It was as though they didn't want me to hit the ball.

In the physical world, putting things in motion usually makes the task much more difficult. However, given time and practice, people tend to improve their performance as they master the physics that addresses the problems of dynamics.

CHANGE: DYNAMICS IN BUSINESS

Dynamics pose many of the same challenges when they are found in business environments and organizations. We often refer to dynamics in this setting as “change.” Although it is true that many things are changing, not all change is positive. Uncertainty—not knowing the future result of current events—is a common byproduct of dramatic or unwanted change in the workplace, and in life. And for many people, uncertainty brings about stress as the feeling of security decreases and, in some situations, fear sets in.

Good leaders respond to change that comes by embracing it and adapting. Beyond that, good leaders respond to

uncertainty by focusing on preparation rather than fear. So, let's consider some keys to leading during uncertain times.

THE PRINCIPLED LEADER

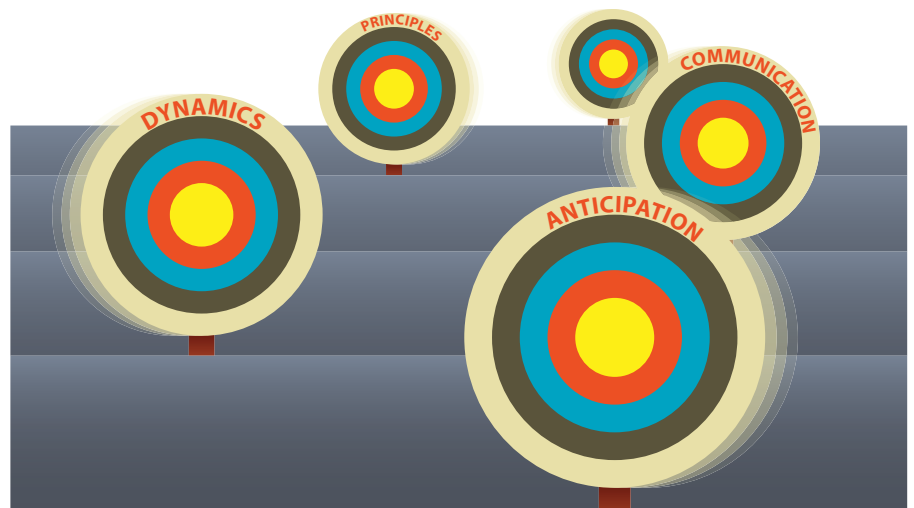
As you start preparing for an uncertain outcome, keep in mind that the inherent problem of dynamics is that everything is moving. Turbulent times call for static principles. One of the great challenges to leadership is the constant pressure to compromise the foundational principles of personal and professional relationships simply to speed up the transition of change. Remember that right is still right, respect is still respect, and honesty is still king. Absent these principles, leading quickly becomes “miss-leading.”

A leader who is not trustworthy cannot lead effectively, and uncertain times

demand principled leadership. Principles define and display the character of a leader, and they will become to the organization what a lighthouse is to ships on a choppy sea. When everything around an organization is in motion, something must be stable. That something is the principled leader.

ANTICIPATION

Stable leadership does not imply stiff-necked resistance to change in any and all forms. In fact, it is the consistency and reliability of the leader's principles and the organization's values that provide the foundation for positive change and adaptation to occur. One of the great skills that a person or organization can possess in dynamic times is anticipation (anticipation in this sense is the



ability to see something in the present and predict where it will be in the near future). This is a learned skill.

To gauge where something is heading, a good leader will 1) identify who is leading the change and seek to discover the motives and drivers of the change, and 2) study the history of similar events. The better the anticipation and forecasting, the easier it will be for the leader to prepare a proper response. By anticipating an event's probable outcome, a leader can evaluate better paths to success. Proactive change is now a possibility, whereas reactive change is the only option when we simply wait and see what happens.

COMMUNICATION VS. DISCRETION

Another key to leading through uncertainty is the communications plan. People want to know what is happening. Tell them. Keep them informed of developments. Get them involved in forecasting activities and in preparing positive responses to likely events. But keep in mind that you may have a unique position that requires being discrete and keeping certain information confidential. These obligations should be kept as well.

This is where a true leader will be tested—in maintaining the right balance between sharing information and maintaining discretion. Once again, integrity and principle-centered leadership are paramount in order to be effective at both.

Remember, the primary effort is to share information and guide people in making good decisions. It is difficult to allay other's fears. That's because fear is one part reality and one part perception. When perception and reality are misaligned there can be either a false sense of security, or a false sense of insecurity. A good leader will work to improve security in a real way, and help people notice that they are doing so. That is different, and better than only raising their perception of security, and hoping they don't notice the reality. Communicate facts in lieu of managing feelings and promote productive activities in lieu of

giving in to paralysis.

By its very nature, business is dynamic. Today, things appear to be in constant motion and moving faster every day. There are and will always be unknowns with change. Sometimes the change comes with anxiety-causing uncertainty, and those times test the mettle of a leader. By focusing on preparation instead

of fear, a principled leader will help his or her organization face the challenges of change, and increase their chances to succeed—and even prosper. ☞

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