

Visionary Leadership Is a Global Need

Global terrorism. The continued manufacturing shift to China. An anemic economic recovery in the U.S. Wherever you look, you see problems.

You see trends and events that can have significant impacts on your business. You see risks...and you're not the only one seeing these things, so are all the people in your organization.

How do you react? As a leader, people watch your every move. They study you, looking for clues to help them determine what to think and what to do. They look to you for answers...especially during times of uncertainty. Rudyard Kipling once wrote that the most critical attribute of a successful person is the ability to keep your head about you when those around you are losing theirs, and some are even blaming it on you.

Brainstorm contingencies for the fears on your worst-case scenario list.

Now it's up to you to keep your head on straight and provide leadership your organization needs to deal with uncertainty and continue to prosper for years to come. Here are a few best practices to help you.



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Take Stock of Your Situation

Franklin Roosevelt once said, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." Left unchecked, fear leads to disastrous consequences. In the absence of information, people will invent data. It often starts around the water cooler—or these days, online or over e-mail.

One person suggests his ideas about how the company will react to some issue (and as human beings we tend to take very pessimistic guesses). These suppositions quickly become rumors. The rumors become unspoken truths, and suddenly people in your organization are basing their decisions and actions on false data. And if the data is negative enough, attrition of your top talent is likely to occur. So how do you combat fear?

Step 1: Articulate worst-case scenarios. Perhaps you fear the import threat that China poses, or that rising R&D costs mean your firm won't remain competitive. Or maybe your fears are more localized, relating to specific problems in your department or the threat of layoffs coming down from corporate. Your fears may even be personal—what if I get laid off? How can I afford to send my kids to college?

Whether global, local or personal, fear shakes our confidence, causes stress and keeps us awake at night. Yet as scary as

these situations may be, we often overestimate the negatives and underestimate our ability to deal with them.

As a young child you may have feared monsters under the bed. What was the best way to get rid of them? Simply turn on the lights. And that's just what you need to do with your adult fears; shine the light on them. Clearly state to yourself what you fear. Make a list of your worst-case scenarios...because most likely, people in your organization are as well.

Step 2: Assess your strengths. Now that you've unmasked your fears, it's time to make a realistic assessment of the tools you can use to address them. Start by making a list of anything you consider to be an asset or resource. These can be specific people, technologies, industry knowledge or any other competencies your organization has and can leverage to gain advantage in the marketplace. They can also be intangible qualities such as the way you react to stress or how willing you are to adapt to new challenges.

Step 3: Develop contingencies. For each of the fears on your worst-case scenario list, brainstorm a list of contingencies. Ask yourself the question "what would we do if this situation became reality?" Review your resources and strengths. Which resources could you put to use to address your fears?

To develop contingency plans, you can also look at the past challenges your organization has faced and how they were addressed. What went well that you would repeat? And what changes would you make the next time? You can also look outside the industries at other businesses that have faced similar challenges. What did the successful firms do to overcome their challenges? What strategies can you emulate?

Be of Service

Mother Theresa offered very practical advice when she said, "If you want to know how to change the world, pick up a broom."

As a visionary leader, your job is to find opportunity, and often the best opportunities come from being in service to others. This exercise is not about determining what's profitable (although that will come later), but rather how you might be able to better service the needs of your industry, your customers and your community. For example, in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, bookstores found themselves to be important sources of information and gathering spaces for neighbors in search of answers and comfort. While large-scale tragedies magnify the need for community, the need—and opportunity—for service always exists.

Ask yourself how your business can be of greater service or help create a more enriched, positive, supportive community.

Imagine the Possibilities

For this exercise, you need to put your negativity, pessimism and cynicism on the shelf. Take a look at the lists you've developed from the previous exercises and imagine how you can reinvigorate or revitalize current products and services. Imagine who else might benefit from the strengths and assets you've listed. Are there other potential markets you have not tapped? Are there other ways you could organize skills, assets and strengths to create new products or services that better fit the needs of your current situation.

For this exercise, ask yourself questions that start with "What if?" or "How could we?" The challenge is to stretch your thinking...to really push yourself to envision new products, new markets, and new ways of doing things. Don't be bound by the confines of today's reality. This exercise is about envisioning what the future can become.

Brainstorm Opportunities

Now that you've identified assets, resources, areas of service and a multitude of possibilities, it's time to determine how to bring them into reality.

What opportunities might exist to bring the ideals and concepts you've defined into your daily, weekly, monthly and annual activities? What resources and revenues will you need? How can potential avenues of service be integrated into your way of doing business or your job? With whom can you create mutually beneficial partnerships to provide your products and services in a way that meets a need, while receiving fair revenue in return? With whom can you partner or to whom can you turn for trusted advice and a helpful perspective to put the needed resources into place and create the dream?

This exercise is about making dreams into reality. It's about finding the resources (and the time) to create the future that you want to create. It's about creating tangible action plans to bring to life a vision of the future that eradicates the fears and challenges your organization is currently facing. It's about answering the question "How can we do it?"

Align Vision with Action

Without tangible action, all the time you've spent developing your vision will be wasted. Nothing gets done, and those fears you envisioned may very well become reality. Now it's up to you to put your plan into action. What can you do today to begin gathering the resources you need? What can you do this week to initiate the process of bringing your opportunities to life? What will you do to share your vision with others, to inspire them, to gain their support and commitment? Typically, the most significant challenge any leader faces is in the implementation of vision. While there is no "one-size-fits-all" formula for success, most visionary leaders do several things:

Step 1: Clearly define the value of your vision. Paint a picture with words that shows people at all levels of the organization how your vision benefits them. If you have to sell your ideas to senior management, show them how the future you foresee will address the risks the organization faces, and remind them of the dangers of not taking action.

To motivate subordinates, outline the tangible benefits that they will receive from making the vision a reality. Show them specifically what's in it for them, and ideally get them to add their ideas to shape your vision, improve upon it, and make it their own.

Step 2: Communicate. Transforming an organization or even a department is a major undertaking. People will be afraid and uncertain about what it means to them and what needs to be done. As a leader, your job is to eliminate their fear and remove the doubt. Provide crystal clear directives. Frequently remind people why the changes are occurring and what the end benefits will be. And help every individual to see his or her importance in making the effort a success. At the same time, be realistic in communicating with others. Don't downplay the difficulty of the challenge or the risks. People will be much more likely to believe you when they perceive that you are realistic.

Step 3: Remember, change requires change. Unfortunately, not everyone will agree with your vision. And even some of those who do agree with you will not have the skills or attitude needed to make your vision work. As a leader, the toughest job you will face will be changing your team. To succeed, you must be willing to remove those people who impede progress and do what ever is necessary to locate and hire the talent you need.