

# Leading Through the Uncertainty ...

## Practical Leadership Advice for Times Like These

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*September 11, 2001, changed the way all of us look at the world and at work. The destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon shattered basic assumptions: that workplaces are fundamentally safe, and that routine business travel holds few risks beyond the occasional lost bag. An already struggling economy has taken a turn for the worse. Fear and uncertainty are present in our workplaces as never before.*

*In times like these, people look to their leaders for direction, meaning, confidence, and hope.*

While leadership has always been a deciding factor in an organization's success, in the post-September 11 environment, specific leadership practices can make the difference between companies that survive and eventually thrive and those that succumb and ultimately fail. Consider the effect of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's actions on the people of New York. He rallied the city—taking command one minute, consoling victims the next, empathizing publicly, even to the point of tears, assuring New Yorkers that everything was under control (as much as was humanly possible), and pointing to the future.

Many stories are emerging of how other leaders have risen to the challenge of guiding their organizations out of the chaos, fear, and uncertainty that surround them today. Just as the solution to this world crisis will take time and patience, the task of leading companies through this uncertainty will take time and persistence. In response to these extraordinary world events, there are five key leadership principles that we believe can be helpful to leaders no matter where they sit in the organizational hierarchy. What follows is not about crisis management. It is about leading companies through a period of intense uncertainty with one eye on today and one eye on the future.

## Be Credible

First, leaders must be credible. Sixty-six percent of employees in today's workplace feel their leaders are not credible. Why is this so important? It is because people who feel their leaders are credible are significantly more likely to feel pride in the organization, to feel strongly connected to their team, and to be committed to the organization's goals and values. Those whose managers' credibility is not strong may comply with directives but will be less motivated. In a business environment where so much is changing so quickly, this extra measure of commitment can make the critical difference in a company's performance.

Three building blocks of credibility are important to recovering, rebuilding momentum, and moving forward.

- 1. Concern for people.** "First and foremost, this is a human tragedy before this is a business tragedy," says Jim Kouzes, co-author of the best-selling book *The Leadership Challenge*. "People must come first ... even before profits." Credibility is built by genuinely demonstrating sensitivity to the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. People working in a challenging, complex workplace are starved for connection. In many companies affected by the recent tragedy, employees are reporting a greater personal connection within the workplace than they had ever experienced before. It is almost impossible to listen too much and communicate too much at this time.
- 2. Commitment.** Commitment means persevering to achieve goals despite obstacles and setbacks. Commitment means working through the challenges of recovery and moving confidently into the future. Leaders who foster commitment in others anticipate critical events and take steps to influence them positively. Commitment also comes through involvement, giving people a concrete way to help. For example, many companies have formed employee teams to look at how they can help customers during these extraordinary times.
- 3. Consistency.** This is a time when a leader's words and actions must be aligned. Proactive, honest, and ongoing communication and updates are often the keys to closing the credibility gap. People don't want uncertainty on top of uncertainty. They want to know the truth, even if the truth changes from time to time. "Give people as many facts about the business as possible. Let them know the process for dealing with the business issues," says Ann Rice Mullen, a Forum executive coach.

Consistency also demands that leaders set expectations clearly, contract for realistic deliverables, and not overcommit themselves or their team. In the coming days, managers must ask themselves what level of performance they can expect from people deeply shaken by September's events and then consistently build back to performance levels that will be required to weather the economic downturn.

As organizations realign to meet current business challenges, consistency in how people are treated can either build or erode a leader's credibility—respecting people's confidentiality and feelings, treating people fairly and impartially, and presenting a consistent point of view when talking with different audiences. A lack of consistency is the greatest potential drain on the balance in one's "credibility bank account".

## Stay Visibly Connected

The second leadership principle is to stay visibly connected. "Visibility has always been an important part of leadership," says Jim Kouzes. "In today's environment, it is absolutely critical." Leaders must think carefully about their communication. Realizing that in an uncertain environment, what they say and what they don't say and the manner in which they do or don't say it may have both intended and unintended consequences. The communication challenge is to insure that the intended message is consistently understood and interpreted across many audiences—Giuliani is an example. "He is sensitive, strong, and answers the questions," one observer remarked.

"This isn't the time for managers to lock themselves away and have lengthy strategy meetings," said a Wall Street investment-banking executive. "It's a time for them to listen and show their presence." Even in geographically dispersed organizations, leadership presence can be achieved. During the week following the terrorist attacks, one global consulting firm conducted a series of all-employee conference calls to keep people informed, assure people that all their colleagues were safe, and clarify actions the organization was taking to meet the needs of its clients and support the company through the crisis. "It was important for me just to hear our leaders' words," remarked an employee, "and to know that things were under control."

## Create Meaning

In the coming days, leaders will more than likely encounter employees who cannot focus on jobs that seem

frivolous in light of recent events. In all crises, people reconsider their priorities. Some have rediscovered their families and the importance of family life. Others are asking questions about the meaning of their work.

“We know that clarity about personal values is a far greater determiner of success than corporate values. The highest level of commitment comes when a company’s purpose connects to individuals’ values,” says Jim Kouzes. “Companies who will recover the quickest are those which engage their people in a recommitment to the company’s purpose and values.” “Shareholder value, rah, rah, rah, does not capture the hearts and minds of employees,” said Bob Galvin, former CEO of Motorola. Those leaders who will be looked upon as successful during these times will take this opportunity to reaffirm the core purpose and values of their corporations and connect it to the motivation of their employees.

## Chart the Way Forward

Research indicates that less than 5 percent of a typical employee group understands their organization’s strategy. In an environment where people’s heads and hearts are in a myriad of places, moving the organization forward means drawing a clear line of sight from your strategy to people’s actions. This provides focus and confidence—keys to coping with the deepening economic downturn and the instability of the future.

Charting the way forward may involve shortening your strategic horizon. This does not mean abandoning your vision. On the contrary, a compelling and credible vision of the future is more important than ever. It does mean, however, focusing on shorter term concrete, actionable outcomes and initiatives. Financial outcomes may be linked to specific, short-term customer, process, and people goals. In our own organization, the Forum executive team has identified several key actions to help clients rethink their learning needs and strategies in light of current circumstances. Small task teams have put together action plans, which are being carried out across our global network—all this in an effort to be client-focused and maintain a line of sight to our own strategy and goals.

Once again, communication is key. Using stories rather than the usual slide presentation can accelerate people’s strategic focus and engagement. Stories can demonstrate the power of individual persistence and contribution. They can show how to meet customer needs during difficult times. Stories can help employees reconnect to the company’s vision and values. Stories can also illustrate

what is important during these times and what is not. Stories create memorable impressions and vivid images that have far more lasting impact than directives or memos.

## Anticipate Change and Adapt

The most important question a leader can ask is not “What can I do?” It is “What is going on?” If caring for people is a leader’s first priority, the next task is to interpret the emerging reality. Only then can the leader intervene constructively.

So how can leaders find the right balance between being responsive in the moment and staying the course? First, they can identify the vital few priorities that are common across the organization and keep these top of mind to drive the constant, difficult trade-off decisions necessary in the face of new and changing events. The leadership agenda should be simple enough that it can be reduced to a mental list that can be drawn upon to reduce indecision, increase speed, and build responsiveness in the moment. This agenda needs to be balanced between people, customers, urgent vs. important projects, short- vs. long-term initiatives. The leader draws from these agendas to quickly select high-payoff actions to execute daily.

Leaders need also to think in contingencies. They can build agility into their leadership by asking, “What is one other way I could accomplish this?”

Leading through this sea of change will test the mettle of every leader. Every action will be scrutinized. In the midst of competing demands on their time, leaders need to make time to consider the situation, where they stand, and what their agenda is. Consider scheduling meetings with yourself. Block out a 2-hour meeting each week to draft an important document, plan for an important customer, accomplish high-impact tasks, and, most important, reflect and care for yourself. “A situation like this forces you to be a real person,” said a leader of a large Midwestern financial institution. “Managers are like blotting paper,” said another. “They have to soak up a lot of tensions, and that’s very exhausting.”

## Summary

Change brings together two opposing forces: crisis and opportunity. A landmark study by psychologists Kobasa and Maddi found that people who survived stressful situations had three important attitudes: challenge, commitment, and control. People can view change as either a threat to things as they are or as a challenge to invent a new future. People who are committed to their

jobs and find meaning in their experience fare better than people who do not. And people who believe they have influence on their environment and act consistently with that belief remain healthy in stressful situations.

Leaders can influence how their organizations respond to these turbulent times by ensuring that their actions and words are aligned. They must stay visible and connected to people and their needs. They must create meaning for employees to lift their sights from the mundane to the purposeful. They must chart the path forward and create a clear line of sight from strategy to action. They must interpret the emerging realities and adapt to unforeseen changes. In times like these, leaders are tested, and those who prove effective will rise to this leadership challenge.

**Should you want to explore further how Forum can help prepare your leaders for today's challenging business environment, please call us at 1-800-FORUM-11.**

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