

Resisting the Mood of Doom

A Leadership Message for Challenging Times

By Tom Stevens (c) 2009

What can we do?

The mood of doom and gloom these days is pervasive. At business conferences, budget meetings of local governments, non-profit board meetings, in shops and offices of business owners, the impact of the economic downturn weighs on everyone's mind.

What can we do?

The problems are real, and for many people the times are disastrous. Those not facing disaster still must contend with reduced net worth and erosion of a sense of security.

In challenging times, leaders must address a core question in the minds of everyone:

What can we do?

Leaders who step up and address this question help build resilience in their followers. The priority in addressing this question is on actions people can take, with emphasis on we, i.e. that actions apply collectively to leaders as well as followers.

In addressing the question, leaders must above all set an emotional tone that will contribute to successful navigation through stormy waters. Emotions amplify our ability to think and act, both positively and negatively. In challenging times, what we don't need to do is amplify our problems. Unchecked gloom will not only make the situation feel worse but undermine our capacity to respond. It's incumbent for leaders to build resistance to the mood of doom and gloom.

In my role as mayor, I included the following seven actions that we could do as individuals and as a community in my annual state of the town address. While originally addressed to our small town, no doubt they will also apply to your organization, business, and personal life.

What can we do? We can...

Master Our Attitude

To resist a doom and gloom mood, we have to both take responsibility for our own attitude, and to gain mastery of it. We take responsibility by becoming aware of our thinking and emotions, track how thinking and emotions are impacted by events in our lives, and how our thinking and emotions impact others. Mastery comes when we take charge of directing our thoughts and emotions, and steer them in directions we want them to go, rather than letting them be completely led by external events.

It is especially important to guard against hopelessness and helplessness. Helplessness paralyzes us. It keeps us from



taking action and seeing opportunities, as demonstrated by Dr. Martin Seligman and other researchers in the field of positive psychology. Becoming trapped by an attitude of helplessness may be as or even more damaging than the more tangible challenges we are facing.

Face Reality While Keeping Faith

Mastering our attitude is a tool for cultivating courage, and we need courage to face brutal reality. But at the same time we resist helplessness as an attitude, we also must diligently guard against denial.

It is no small feat to face enormous challenges, and at the same time to keep faith in ourselves, in our collective wisdom, courage, humanity, and resilience to face whatever difficulties arise and overcome them. Yet that is precisely what leaders of exceptional

organizations seek to do. Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, calls this the Stockdale paradox, named after the eight year long prisoner-of-war experience of Admiral Jim Stockdale.

Stockdale noted that it wasn't the "optimists" who survived imprisonment, but those who recognized their harsh reality yet continued to have faith and take action toward a successful end of the story. "I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

Stick To Our Knitting

This is not the time to stop everything. Rather, tough times are when you most need to stick with the fundamentals of what makes your organization, your business, your industry work.

The underlying assumption is that you know your fundamentals to the bone. If you don't, NOW is the time to figure it out and do so quickly. Can you communicate the basic premise of your

Tough times? Don't stop everything, rather stick to the fundamentals of what makes your organization work.

business? Do you know who your profitable customers are, and the value proposition that keeps them engaged? Can you describe your strategy? Can you do all of these in one page?

In good times organizations often thrive in spite of incredible sloppiness in their organization, strategy, and leadership. This is not so easy when times get tough. Tough times require diligence, discipline, and focus to keep doing the right things and to keep heading in the right direction, even if the path, timeline, and means of getting there is in flux.

Diligently Seek And Seize Opportunities

There are train wrecks out there, but there are also incredible opportunities. Now is the time to use what resources you have to seek opportunities, and seize upon them!

If your businesses is in a competitive marketplace, now might be your chance to weed out your less competent competitors. Maybe it's time to do some company pruning that needs to happen. For many items it's a buyers market, whether you are buying a company car or a company. Take advantage of strategic buying opportunities.

When considering how to allocate resources in challenging times, focus foremost on changes that will benefit customers. At a recent seminar, an experienced CEO gave two examples of making changes in difficult times, one a disaster, and the other a huge success. The disaster involved a management decision to double the sales force in response to flagging sales. Additional sales staff provided no benefits to customers. Nor did it appreciably increase acquiring new business, rather it reduced margins on their existing sales - an expensive lesson. In the successful example, after polling customers on needs the company management decided to increase delivery routes. This proved to be an added value for customers who gave the company more of their business, and the company gained increased market share in a down economic cycle.

*Success is more likely
from organizational change
that will benefit customers.*

Focus On Action Within Our Control

Unfortunately, it's easy to become fixated on what we can't do now, what we can't afford, what obstacles stand in our way. Even if choices are constricted, it's more productive to keep your mind on action that is within your ability to execute. Assess what choices you have, not obsess about one's you don't. Focus on options, not obstacles.

The times require us to become more comfortable with uncertainty, one of the most stressful human conditions. One way to reduce the stress of uncertainty is to avoid viewing it as an all-or-nothing condition. Instead, think about 'in what way' a situation is uncertain. In most situations a few predictable outcomes are likely. For example, a budget item may be completely funded, partially funded, or simply eliminated. Having reduced uncertainty to a finite number of outcomes, foster clarity about choices in each scenario.

Foster Partnerships And Collaborations

A time of reduced choices and means creates increased opportunities for success through joining forces and resources with others.

Think "stone soup" - as in the fairy tale, where travelers fed themselves and a starving town by convincing everyone to add one ingredient from their meager supplies to a common pot. No one by themselves had the wherewithal to create a soup, yet together they made a hearty stew. Leaders make stone soup, and they do it by being the catalyst that brings resources together for everyone's benefit.

Tough times can easily exacerbate obstacles to cooperation. When people put in hard work and long hours, and then are called upon to do more with less, the natural tendency is to start assuming others aren't pulling their weight. Finger pointing at other units and departments for perceived failures can rapidly explode, and erode motivation to cooperate. Savvy leaders know they have to stay well in front of this dynamic. They constantly work to keep their people on the same page, and to nurture cooperative attitudes and relationships.

Live With Renewed Intention

It's a fine line between experiencing challenges as overwhelming and feeling challenges are what gives us vigor and energy. One thing that keeps us on the constructive side of that line is to continue to invest time and energy in the things that make life worth living, to "stop and smell the roses."

Indeed, major challenges - putting food on the table, making payroll, keeping the doors open - can paradoxically evoke not taking the good things in our life for granted. Helen Keller reminds us, "We could never learn to be brave and patient, if there were only joy in the world." Tough experiences can prompt us to live with more purpose, appreciation, and intention. We work, hold a job, and make money in order to live -- not the other way around.

There are three ways leaders can put these actions, and any others which provide guidance during challenges, to good use. First, we use them to manage our own circumstances. Next, we practice them to become an example to others. And finally, we pass on the message of resisting the mood of doom, fostering resilience, and cultivating success.

What can we do? Plenty!



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