

Leading Through The Storm

The Eagle Perspective

by
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A friend recently said to me: “I couldn’t do what you do because all you do is clean up other people’s messes.”

At first I was a bit taken aback by his comment, but, upon reflection, it’s as good a description as any of the work I do. I’m usually not called in until someone’s in a mess—when something is broken—but, at that point, I help people soar above the storm. Whether it’s a conflict they need sorted out, a negotiation gone awry, diversity issues or an executive team in need of development and coaching, I help visionary leaders maintain the perspective that will allow them to see their stormy environment as opportunities for growth, productivity and performance.

While I didn’t intentionally choose this career path, I can now see that my background has given me a unique view of executives and other leaders on the hot seat. While practicing litigation and standing in front of federal judges for ten years, I was able to see which executives turned the caldron of adversity into the seeds of greatness and who floundered in stormy seas. As a founder and executive of a public company, I helped captain a boat through the challenges of a start-up and watched the reactions of others who did or did not rise above those issues. In my current business, I speak to and advise executives who are in the midst of challenging times.

As with many things, how you view the problems helps determine the result. One of my clients has been in the property management business for over twenty years. Since I’m challenged to keep my own household well maintained and running, I can’t imagine flourishing in that business. And yet Steve is one of the most upbeat, efficient people I know. He juggles the demands of picky commercial tenants in dozens of building. He attacks the constant stream of broken skylights, clogged drains and even collapsed roofs from Denver’s recent record four feet blizzard without complaint.

“Property management is all about solving problems,” Steve asserts. If you don’t like solving problems, you shouldn’t be in this business. I love going to work

every day because I know I'm going to be able to fix all those problems and be a hero."

Yet, today most of my clients feel overwhelmed with problems in the current environment. No question that we're in the midst of stormy seas. In fact, I like to point out to my audience that it's a Perfect Storm. If you remember that movie, the reason it was a perfect storm was that three different fronts coalesced to make a storm that sailors had been training for centuries to sail through.

Today we're also assaulted with three challenging fronts: the economy, world chaos and what I call the "rage gap." Most executives have not sailed through these oceans and yet, it's the storm they've been training their entire career to lead through. This environment provides the opportunity to create outstanding leaders.

BAD TIMES VS. GOOD TIMES

The reality is that many executives today have led only in good times, without the current challenges of the economy, the constant threat of world terrorism, ongoing wars and diseases, and the employee morale problem I've called the "rage gap."

In fact, in good times, most of us became intellectually lazy. We had a false sense of reality—not security, but reality—meaning that we think something's real, but it's not. We glossed over things; we avoided conflict. We glossed over issues that were problems because times were good. We focused elsewhere. We became lazy. We became complacent. In this false sense of reality, we became intellectually lazy.

Now most of us are in stormy times: bankruptcies, mergers and acquisitions, downsizing, rightsizing, terrorist's threats and even new diseases such as SARS. In this kind of storm, we have to heighten our senses. In a way, our senses are heightened, but unfortunately, they're heightened on the ground, and on the ground you can't see 100 yards ahead—there's too much smoke and too much fire. In order to lead through the storm we need to develop what I call the eagle perspective and soar above it.

We need to increase a certain kind of IQ. We were always smart, but we just didn't use it in the way we need to use now. Many executives haven't developed what they need to lead through this kind of storm.

THE RAGE GAP

When times were good, there were irritants; there were annoyances. Now there's downright rage. Any long-time attorney will tell you how this happens. When times are good, clients don't sue, they just go on to the next deal, thinking there's enough for everyone. When times are bad, everyone sues. In good time, attorneys who handle transactions—buying and selling property, new stock offerings—thrive. In bad times, it's the litigators who clean up. Litigators pray for bad times.

Most of the people we're trying to lead are enraged. In fact, many leaders are also enraged. This sets off a whole psychological dynamic that we need to learn how to lead through because people are no longer irritated; they're no longer annoyed. In fact, they are not just enraged, they are fighting for survival. As one university executive that I coach recently complained to me, "people are fighting about paper clips."

Every skirmish becomes a battle. Have you noticed this? Paper clips become the issue. The storms have given us a workplace of rage and denial. Workers are enraged: their sense of reality has been violated; their sense of entitlement has been undermined. We have created a fearful and raging workforce with all the constant changes, terrorist threats and the fear of economic insecurity.

And what's even more difficult is that a lot of the rage has gone underground. Many people don't openly acknowledge that they're angry, they just work slower, meander around corporate directives or "forget" to accomplish certain tasks. That leaves executives and managers floundering in a sea of confusion about why their objectives remain uncompleted.

What I call the rage gap is the gap between employees' expectations and reality. Employees held certain expectations during the good times that we can't now realize. The first step then is to close that gap. In future newsletter issues, we'll address solutions for that challenging problem.

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