

Perspectives

Leading in Emotional Times

THE BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP

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Emotions and values drive behavior. They are the fuel of human performance. In these tumultuous times, spiraling emotions and a hunger for values are providing leaders with the opportunity of a lifetime to create change—whether that change is to chart new directions, establish new priorities and work practices, or inspire their organizations to achieve unprecedented levels of performance.

Since September 11, the longing for community and purpose has been intense. The job losses and insecurity generated by the current recession have only magnified those feelings. People in all walks of life yearn for leaders to provide context, meaning, and direction—as well as opportunities to make positive contributions. Now it's up to business leaders to step up and provide their followers with a sense of purpose and a chance to make a difference.

The Personal Touch

As always, the right strategy for change is critical. Equally important, however, is the

way the organization is led to embrace and then to execute that change. In a period of uncertainty and high anxiety, six fundamental tenets of leadership are particularly crucial.

Be highly visible. In times of stress, the more available and approachable leaders are the better. You need to be out and about. You need to interact constantly with employees, customers, and suppliers. Avoid communicating solely by memo—remoteness is not reassuring.

Provide relevant information. Everyone knows we're in a recession. But they don't know, and desperately need to hear, what their leaders think it means for them. People will not expect you to have definitive answers. But they will expect you to have contingency plans for different scenarios and to be able to explain what the different plans will require of them.

By telling employees and suppliers what you know, what you don't know, and how you will make decisions—and by communicating that information frequently and in a personal manner—you will provide comfort while helping people feel in control of their own lives.

Ask for help and share the credit. Many leaders find themselves in unfamiliar terri-

tory: having to lead during a major recession and a new kind of war. No one expects a single person to have all the answers, but your employees and suppliers do hope you will have the wisdom to know when to ask for help from people inside and outside the company in order to get through these tough times. And, of course, share the credit. Making space for others to contribute and be recognized has enormous payoffs.

Be human. People want to think their leader is in control and in charge, but they won't go the extra mile for someone who is all logic and no emotion. Especially in times like these, that kind of behavior is a turnoff. It makes people wonder, Doesn't he care about what has happened or what we're facing? In other words, it's not just the information that you share that matters; it's also how you communicate that information.

Speeches at large group meetings or videotaped addresses will not suffice. You should also talk individually to as many people as you can. Take the time to listen—to show that you genuinely care about how your employees, suppliers, and customers feel. Just as important is conveying how *you* feel. Authenticity, connection, and humanity are powerful aspects of leadership—and ones that cannot be faked. A major reason why Mayor Rudolph

Giuliani was so effective in the wake of the terrorist attacks was his demeanor: he was calm and strong, while also being human and vulnerable.

Offer hope and a renewed sense of purpose. Business leaders need to put a stake in the ground for the future, to show the way to a better tomorrow. People can endure a lot when they believe that there will be an end to the turmoil and that the hardships and demanding initiatives are part of a credible strategy for creating a brighter future.

Encourage people to get excited. The events of recent months have been so depressing that people often feel shallow, disconnected, or even guilty if they are in a good mood. What people need now is permission to feel good, to be excited about their work and confident about the future. The challenge for leaders is not only to give direction and goals worth striving for but also to exemplify the energy and enthusiasm needed to get there.

Connecting Emotionally

The yearning for leadership has never been greater. Companies led by leaders who can connect emotionally to their employees, suppliers, and customers—and who can satisfy

the hunger for direction and purpose—will emerge vastly stronger from these tumultuous times than they entered them.

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