

# Managing in Tough Times

Creative connections and dialogue stimulate opportunities

BY CHRIS OBST



BY NOW, THE SHOCK SHOULD HAVE worn off. Your wait-and-see approach of hoping it wouldn't really affect your business didn't work out the way you would have liked. And heck, you're probably already used to talking about and working in this "new economy." But as much as you may still feel like digging a hole and burying your head in the sand until this all blows over, doing the exact opposite will be the key to helping you survive and thrive in this business climate.

## CHOOSE YOUR MINDSET

During a time of uncertainty, leaders and managers usually adopt one of two major mindsets: the protectionist mindset or the opportunity mindset.

When people in the protectionist mindset

see the potential for loss, they become inwardly focused and work to defend what they have. This inward focus leads to communication breakdowns (think Nixon's White House) and, ultimately, to a culture where rumours, assumptions and misinformation spread. Without good information and direct communication, no one knows what's going on or where they can go for help. People can sense the storm coming but they feel powerless and alone, prompting them to protect what they have and causing the cycle to continue.

On the other hand, particularly when there is potential for loss, people can choose to find opportunities. When we look outside of our own situation and see ourselves in relation to those around us, we see that helping others

also helps us. We inquire about others, share information, and initiate and participate in open, direct conversations. We make creative connections and all that dialogue stimulates opportunity and hope. We grow by being part of something larger than ourselves. And when we work together, the cycle continues.

In the past and in the present, we've seen both mentalities play out with people, companies, sectors and entire economies. What has your mindset been lately? And what do you see playing out around you?

## GET ACTIVE AND STAY ACTIVE

It's natural for people and businesses to draw into themselves when things take a turn downward and the future becomes uncertain. But doing what seems natural isn't

always doing what's best. The laws of inertia remind us that an object in motion will stay in motion, and an object not in motion will just stay put. Sitting around fretting can literally paralyze you into thinking small and focusing on the negative, and ultimately into a state of depression. That won't help you or anyone around you.

Instead, stay active to promote energy and creative thinking. Resist the urge to hide in your office and send e-mails. Instead, force yourself to get out and see people face-to-face. Your customers, your staff, your colleagues, your stakeholders – they all want and need to hear from you. Everyone is worrying about themselves and their own stake in this, so now is the time to pay it forward and see what you can do to positively impact those around you. Ask what you can do to help. Look for innovative solutions to challenges from all the sources around you.

Speaking of being active, exercise can be your biggest ally in times like these. Increased physical activity increases oxygen and blood flow, which stimulates creativity and mental acuity, plus increases energy levels. Exercising also removes toxic chemicals from your body and can generate endorphins and hormones that will improve your outlook, mood and disposition. If you aren't exercising now, start! (See your doctor first if you need to.) If you are exercising a little, turn it up and exercise more.

### START TALKING

The best way to promote activity is to open up the lines of communication. Talk to your clients about how they are doing. Talk to your vendors. Talk to your staff. In difficult times, you need to pull your people together and talk about the realities. There may be some things you can't share but, as a rule, I say err on the side of being candid and honest.

The first people you should be reaching out to are your team members. To help motivate and equip them for working in this climate, start by sharing three key strategies:

- **Generate an opportunity mindset:** Give people the real story about what's happening

and then open up the conversation to move people from, "What's happening to me?" to "What can I do?"

- **Focus on strengthening relationships:** In tough times you see how strong your relationships are. Take the opportunity to make them stronger. Listen, help, connect, reach out and build your reputation for forward thinking.

- **Think outside the usual boundaries:** Think outside your team, your department, your company or sector. People need to generate revenue. How can you and your team help them do that? Who do you



know? Who can you connect?

And remember: If you lead the conversation, you shape it. If there might be layoffs, talk about it. If sales are down, talk about it. If people are making changes, talk about it. And steer the conversations back to opportunity, relationships and out-of-the-box thinking.

### MAKE SURE YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

Remind team members that everyone is as busy as they are. While this is the time to maintain and strengthen relationships, take care there is some thought behind every phone call or e-mail. "Hi, I just wanted to touch base," is not a good reason to take up anyone's time. In an economic climate where everyone is doing more, if you leave a voice

mail that does not hold the promise of working toward a solution, don't expect a call back. However, if you leave a message that offers a valid business reason for a conversation, chances are you've started a discussion that will benefit everyone. Keep your fingers on the pulse of customer activity by scheduling time to:

- **Initiate solutions-oriented conversations.** Be prepared with some research on how the economy may be impacting the sector and the role you can play as they address those challenges.

- **Ponder partnerships.** More than ever, this economy requires managers to think more broadly and to be cognizant of how they can best support the companies with whom they do business. Providing meaningful support and offering real solutions will contribute to your partner companies' competitive advantage and, indirectly this will benefit your own company. After all, we will all only do as well as our clients and business partners.

The fact is, I haven't managed a team through anything exactly like this. No one has. We have never seen a downturn happen so quickly or across so much terrain. But I absolutely know this: Now is no time to allow ourselves to be paralyzed by a protectionist mindset. The people who rally now will win in 2009.

It's going to be tough, but the teams who survive will thrive. They will be stronger, have less competition and enjoy better relationships. And that's a recipe for more opportunity. **BCB**



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