



December 4, 2008

Maintaining a business in tough times requires creative thinking

By Ed Brenegar

REAL LIFE LEADERSHIP

Question: I run a small business that is trying to keep its head above water during these challenging economic times. Daily I am trying to hold onto our client base so I can avoid having to let go any of our employees. I am finding it harder to lead my business because I don't feel in control any longer. What can I do?

Answer: During challenging times, we see our options begin to diminish. As a result, we think our only option is to cut cost, cut staff, cut spending, cut programs — cut, cut and cut some more. This is not a way out of a difficult situation. The way out is to creatively look at situations and see what opportunities are present.

I asked leadership coach George Fleming about this question, and he provided some helpful insight.

“When our goals are limited to survival or not letting people go, it rarely leads to our best and most creative thinking. When our vision is much bigger than the current hurdle, it puts the current challenge in a larger context — a context that is inspiring and empowering instead of a problem-oriented focus. It also requires that we elevate how we look at our business. This allows us to envision from a stance of ‘What’s possible now?’ instead of ‘How can we hold onto the way we’ve done it up to now?’”

When good times turn to hard times, often we find we have not been as creative as we need to be. It is important to understand when we are in this situation. We are not in a survival mode. We are in transition from what we have been into what we will be in the future. The question we must face is whether the future is going to be better than the present. It can be, but it starts with our attitude toward the future.

I've written about the “Four Questions That Every Leader Must Ask.” These questions help us focus on how to manage these life and business transitions:

1. What is the impact of our business?
2. Who are we impacting?
3. What opportunities do we have because of our impact?
4. What problems or obstacles have we created that keep us from having the impact we want?

By asking these questions, a vision for what we can do appears.

By looking beyond our immediate difficulties, we see that there are new opportunities. By including staff and customers, a vision for future impact can show us our way forward.

We can't do this by ourselves. We need to involve others in this transition. As Fleming told me, “Survival is a short-term, problem-oriented goal that requires a lot of energy. Having a bold, bigger vision for your company creates energy and innovation that pulls us forward towards this inspiring future.”

If we do this, we learn how to lead when we are not in absolute control.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition planning consultancy. He writes a blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.

Additional Facts

Leadership workshops

What: Lessons in Leadership

Where: Grove Park Inn

Date: Jan. 20

Cost: \$39 (includes box dinner between afternoon and evening sessions)

More info: www.wncleaders.com.
