

HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Strictly Houston. Strictly Business.

Week of December 5-11, 2008

Leading your team in tough times is a formidable challenge

One of the biggest business challenges in these turbulent times is leading and motivating the team.

How do you keep people focused, deal with stress and achieve your organization's goals when bad news is all around?

Whether you are a public or private company or selling products or services, leadership needs to embrace a systematic approach to help weather these storms and keep the organization on track.

Here are some guidelines:

Operate with transparency: Don't keep your people guessing as to your view of the world and the impact of current events on your company. People need to know what the leaders are thinking and how they are responding to changed circumstances. Be open, thoughtful and direct. Share your views throughout the organization.

Communicate authentically: The most valuable communication occurs at the intersection of the facts, my purposes and concerns and your purposes and concerns. To be effective when dealing with the team, leaders need to confront all three of these. What facts exist that are relevant to communication with the organization? What economic, regulatory, social or other changes have occurred that affect the company? What is the company's current performance and forecast for future performance? What are the trends and patterns that affect strategic and tactical decision-making?

The next inquiry is an introspective look at what leadership views as positive and negative in the current circumstances. What needs to be preserved? What are our fears and concerns?

The third inquiry calls for leadership to con-



**BUILDING
BUSINESS
BILL
BOYAR**

sider other perspectives and look at the world through the eyes of the team. What do we think is of concern to our people? What issues are causing fear or insecurity? At the intersection of these three areas lies a foundation for authentic communication.

Be present: Leaders need to be there and be visible, keep doors open, walk around and show strength. If not, the team will be left to its own devices. The conversation will more likely be based on fear, gossip and innuendo, rather than facts. And that's a threat to productivity and stability. If authentic communication is a key to organizational well-being, then being present is imperative.

Reset your plans but don't panic: Effective leaders have to demonstrate a calm, thoughtful manner in dealing with challenging times. This rule particularly applies to how leaders confront strategic plans that no longer seem to fit. Approach planning with controlled urgency, but not panic. Accept that much of the planning that was done in a robust economy no longer applies. Revisit strategy and tactics. Ask relevant penetrating questions. What still works and needs to be preserved? What no longer applies and needs to be abandoned? What new ideas make sense in the new world? What should we be doing differently as an organization tomorrow? What should each individual member of our team be doing differently tomorrow?

Reset the budget: The next leadership principle is to revisit the operating budget. Don't wait for the typical budget cycle to turn. Leadership should immediately initiate a full budget review to re-examine spending decisions. Be reflective, strategic and responsible when making budget decisions under these conditions. The budget review process should include all members of senior management, as well as those immediately impacted by budget reductions.

Leadership should challenge everyone and everything. This is not a time for sacred cows or provincial thinking. The rules have changed, so leadership must respond accordingly.

Act now to achieve short-term outcomes: A critical rule of leadership in these unusual times is to challenge your team to act now to achieve measurable, realistic outcomes. This is not a time for protracted planning and contemplation. This is a time for action designed to achieve short-term outcomes. Leadership must take an aligned commitment to achieving these near term objectives with the collective contributions of the team. Give the team something to embrace that is consistent with the organization's new thinking, as reflected in the revised strategy and budget.

Manage stress; don't create it: Help your people manage stress; don't be the source of it. It's appropriate for leaders to challenge the team, reject legacy thinking and be creatively disruptive of entrenched ideas. It is not acceptable for leaders to be the source of stress in an unproductive way. Give comfort when and where appropriate. Don't create unnecessary concern.

By operating consistent with these principles, leaders can contribute something very important to the team — hope for stability and predictability.

It is the mandate of leadership to manage the environment so that hope prevails. With an aligned team, operating consistent with the values of the company, pursuing the organization's refined strategies through productive actions, there is hope that the organization can withstand the turmoil, remain healthy and continue to pursue its mission.

BILL BOYAR is chairman of law firm Boyar & Miller in Houston.