

Creating Success in the Face of Great Uncertainty

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The phone rang. It was a long-term client. She asked for my help in dealing with, in her words, “unprecedented leadership circumstances.” I could tell by the edginess in her voice that her confidence was shaken. For the ensuing months we dissected and analyzed every part of her organization—and we started with her mindset. Had she maintained perspective? Did any part of her mission change? What were her sources of information? How were her people affected and what did they believe? Were there alternatives as to how she used to do business that would achieve the same, or better, outcomes in the future?

Like many leaders, my client felt overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught of draconian measures imposed on her organization by various governmental jurisdictions. Many of her assumptions and perceptions of the routine were unexpectedly challenged. She felt like she faced more restrictions than options.

Surviving disruption

When we strip away the emotional and intellectual clutter that obscures one’s perspective, I maintain that results and people are still the only top-tier measurements on which leaders should be judged. In fact, my clients who continued to be successful over the past, tumultuous year, fell back on the fundamentals of organizational leadership. They followed a familiar roadmap in excruciating detail:

- Maintained their value proposition and

mission accomplishment by making modifications in the creation and delivery of their goods and services.

- Reassessed risk exposure and mitigation activities in a changed context—they were willing to alter every basic assumption of the past.
- Mapped workflow, data, and access permissions and processes to accommodate an altered workforce set of circumstances.
- Increased process and supply chain resiliency by leveraging AI and Big Data analysis.
- Invested in new skills, education, and training for their people — and revised their HR policies to reward performance in the new work environment.

“The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”
—Stephen Covey

Many knowns among the unknowns

The successful leaders with whom I worked, realized that their foundational responsibilities were unchanged, even though the environment in which they had to execute may have been altered radically. These leaders were still expected to balance the same competing priorities as before: individual needs versus organizational ones, risk versus reward, quality versus cost, execution versus planning, and expediency versus resilience.

Together, we learned, and in some cases re-learned, leadership lessons that are now foremost in our minds.

- Trust is too often the first casualty in troubled times. A leader’s first order of

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business is always maintaining it, or restoring same, if needed. This may require rationalizing the impact of forces external to and beyond the control of the organization with internal decisions made in order to deal with major, unexpected changes.

- Stressful situations identify marginally contributory activities. Be willing to abandon these and replace them with higher valued and more productive ones.
- Not all newly adopted practices are equal. Some will be temporary in nature, while others will become part of the permanently changed environment. Discerning the difference will be critical.

As my long-term client discovered in the end, as did my other successful mentees, while everything may have changed, nothing was different. Leadership at its core, regardless of circumstance, is about achieving desired outcomes through people. Good leaders focus more on the performance of people using a system in lieu of system performance. “Unprecedented” is a word reserved for those who are clueless about human history, as well as leadership principles and purpose. ■