

The New Realities Leadership

BY RANDY G. PENNINGTON

This is not the first slow economy or recession. We have witnessed scandals before. And most organizations go through periods where employee engagement is less than spectacular.

So what's different now? And more importantly, how does it affect your ability to lead today?

Two factors make this time unique:

- Very few of us have lived through a time when the challenges of war, threat of terrorist attack, economic slowdown, global competitiveness and scandal all existed simultaneously.
- There is a growing sense that the old models of organizations and institutions are no longer working. The length and depth of the Great Recession have created a level of anxiety and uncertainty that have not existed in recent memory. It is difficult to look toward a positive future while wondering if the bright light at the end of the tunnel is, in fact, the proverbial train.

The New Realities

This unique convergence of events has created an environment where:

Past success proves you were right once. Having a great year last year means that expectations are higher this year. Agencies are challenged to provide additional services with existing or diminished resources. Employees are expected to do more and more with less and less, and then rewarded with the opportunity to do even more with even less. Association leaders must increase value in a battle for their members' limited time. Continuous

improvement and flawless execution are no longer optional.

Change is constant – crisis is real. Everything you thought you knew about the need to change has been multiplied. “We’ve never done it that way before” has become the code word for impending irrelevance. Crisis is essentially change on steroids. Threats have always existed. The world realities have made everyone realize that the potential is real. The first response in a crisis is to make things safe. The same applies to creating an environment where people are committed to change.

Integrity matters – trust is essential. The near collapse of the banking system in 2008 proves this point. Add a continuing parade of highly publicized scandals and the feeling that our leaders may not be up to the task, and you have a recipe for cynicism and mistrust. The first instinct is to protect ourselves even to our mutual detriment. Take steps immediately to restore and maintain the trust of customers, vendors and employees.

Relationships make the difference. We live in a volunteer society. Customers volunteer their loyalty. Employees volunteer their commitment even though compliance can be mandated. Citizens volunteer their support for agencies. Association members volunteer their time, talents and participation. Great products and services are the minimum to compete. Your long-term success is based on your ability to build and sustain relationships.

Everyone leads. Great strategies fail without great leaders at every level of an organization. Flattened organizational charts and increased demands require that everyone take on the responsibilities of leadership regardless of her/his position. Constant leadership development is a must for everyone.



What You Should Do Today

Here are three things you can do immediately to succeed in the face of the new realities:

- 1) **Keep perspective:** It is a mistake to assume that our first experience with a given situation marks the first time it has occurred. History shows us valuable lessons for success if we are willing to look, listen and learn.
- 2) **Stay focused and flexible:** Don't confuse staying focused on the goal with being rigid in execution of the plan. These times require that we move forward with existing plans and continually look for new opportunities.
- 3) **Invest in people:** Howard Putnam, former CEO of Southwest Airlines said, “No one flies solo.” Given the choice between a great organizational system and committed people, the effective leader will choose people every time. Relationships built on commitment and trust are the lifeblood of successful leaders and organizations.

In the face of our new realities, one thing has not changed. The leader's job continues to be delivering results by helping others succeed.

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