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LEADERSHIP IN CHALLENGING TIMES

BY DR VICTOR S.L. TAN

THERE is a saying that goes: "When the going gets tough, the tough gets going". In challenging times, leaders need to bite the bullet and confront the real issues instead of being wishy-washy with lots of double talk. Here are some key actions leaders can take.

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1

Maintain competitiveness without reducing price

In a downturn, where sales are decreasing, it is all too easy to succumb to reducing prices of products and services. It is better to find out what is truly ailing customers and provide them with what they value most. Often on closer scrutiny, other non-price factors, such as convenience, superb service, suitability of products and speedy response to customer complaints, are more important than just price. Reducing price obviates the need to improve. People will no longer explore new ways to differentiate their products or services. It is such complacency that will eventually lead to a company's downfall.

2

Engage staff in resolving real issues

The role of the leader is not to provide all the solutions to the staff. Enough damage has been done in school where teachers think for their students and spoon-feed them. The more leaders get their people to think for themselves and come up with right solutions, the more effective their leadership is. This makes perfect sense as it is not possible for a leader to be aware of all the actual happenings in the workplace. By engaging employees to address the real issues, they will also develop more commitment and a sense of belonging, which provides an intrinsic motivation for them to perform better.

3

Set high goals

Nothing breeds complacency faster than low goals and expectations. All too often, leaders like to rationalise that the company is not doing too badly compared with others. Others rationalise that they have done relatively well considering how far they have come. They would argue that given the tough challenges in the industry and the economy, the company is doing pretty well.

Michelangelo, the multi-talented Italian painter, architect, sculptor and poet, said it best: "The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark." For that will certainly drive us to become complacent.

Set high goals and inspire people to achieve them.

4

Monitor progress regularly

One supervisor learnt the hard way. To build a "more trusting environment", he decided to get rid of the weekly output progress meeting and allow each individual to monitor his or her own progress. After two months, the production output fell by 20 per cent. Monitoring progress is not about not trusting others. In fact, it has a positive psychology effect on people if it is done right.

According to Peter Drucker, the father of management, "what gets measured, gets done". To prevent complacency in the workplace, it will be useful for leaders to remember the adage "People do not do what the manager expects and they do what the manager inspects".

5

Hold people accountable for results

There is magic in holding people accountable for results. It conveys two very important messages. One, belief in the person's ability. The other, the importance of the responsibility the person plays. To be effective, this must be communicated in a positive and confident manner. It is not about telling people to do whatever they can and "to try your best". It is about communicating to people that their result is an important part of a puzzle. The success of the company depends on each person delivering the results that they are accountable for. In essence, when it comes to the company's success, everyone is a V.I.P. (very important participant).

6

Discipline and penalise not performers

As a consultant, having worked with many companies, I noticed that most Asian managers are poor disciplinarians. They are better at playing the good guy and delivering the great news. Discipline does not mean shouting and threatening people, although some managers seem to falsely believe that is the case. I once asked a manager why he screamed at one of his staff. His rationale at justifying his behaviour was most telling: "Well, some people have to be shouted at, otherwise they just don't move." There is a better way.

One simply has to be firm and fair in disciplining and penalise non-performers. To be firm is to be unwavering and not give in to sob stories. To be fair is to provide training, resources, and ample notices about their poor performance before action is taken.

7

Reward and recognise based on performances

Human beings are predictable. They have needs to meet. Not just basic needs. They have other needs to be nourished—emotionally, psychologically and intellectually. People want to feel important. They want to be recognised for what they have done. They want to belong. They are driven by ego and a need to achieve. Ultimately, they want a sense of fairness in terms of recognition and reward for the effort they have put in. If humans are so predictable, how is it that leaders find it so hard to motivate people to perform? Motivation in an organisation has been stained by company politics, human flaws of favoritism, conflict of interest, self-driven agenda and other motivation-dampening behaviours.

To motivate people to perform, leaders simply have to reward and recognise people based on performance.

Challenging times indeed provide opportunities for strong leadership. Leaders need to seize the bull by its horns; make difficult decisions and take bold actions to ensure their companies survive.