



WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

Leading change in a challenging environment

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Leaders of organizations must navigate constantly changing times, whether it's in the form of unpredictable events or the competitive marketplace in which they operate.

When we look back at what has occurred nationally and globally since 2000, it's nothing short of earth-shattering. We have had global health scares, including SARS, the H1N1 epidemic, and now the Ebola virus. In the United States, we had the "dotcom" bubble burst, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the subprime mortgage crisis, and the Wall Street collapse of AIG, Lehman Brothers, and Bear Stearns. Oil reached \$147 per barrel, and in 2008, we entered the worst economic catastrophe since the Great Depression.

Currently, global conflicts are everywhere. We have the constant threat of terrorist attacks. We suffered through wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and now we are dealing with the Gaza-Israel, Ukraine, Iraq, and Syrian conflicts. The magnitude or frequency of these events is not going to change anytime soon.

Technological challenge

The competitive landscape has been challenging, too, including technological changes that have either destroyed an industry or created a new one. The media industry is a perfect example of how quickly industries can change. Ten years ago, no one heard of Kindles, iPads, iPhones, or Androids. Netflix was a company from which you rented movies. Today, three quarters of all Netflix sales are related to its original television shows. In addition, hundreds of newspapers have disappeared thanks to digital media.

Given the speed of change, how do leaders adapt and continue to be successful, and what impact do these changes have on employees?

First, leaders need to spend a considerable amount of their time looking ahead and being prepared for all contingencies. They need to create employee teams whose job it is to anticipate change or react to events quickly.

When the H1N1 influenza outbreak occurred, organizations throughout the country moved with great speed to develop employee communication and help contain the virus. Many of those emergency plans

developed to battle the outbreak are now commonplace. In fact, without H1N1, there probably wouldn't even be a product line called "hand sanitizers."

Reduce anxiety

Second, leaders must focus on reducing anxiety in the workplace so employees can focus on their jobs, be productive, and not worry about job security. Leaders must be committed to open, honest communication and must know their workforce. Workers process information in different ways. The Baby Boom generation is used to memos from the boss. Generation Xers and millennials prefer social media and other less traditional communication vehicles.

Third, interacting with employees is a key to reducing employee anxiety. The old adage "manage by walking around" is still one of the greatest tools available to leaders. Employees love to see the CEO or president walking around, meeting and talking to employees. Employees get worried when there is radio silence from the leadership team. Yes, spending time talking to employees is time-consuming, but it may be the single most important thing a leader of an organization can do.

Fourth, develop multiple plans for success. Great leaders know there is never just one single path when it comes to battling a competitor or dealing with some unforeseen event. When I meet with clients to develop a strategy for dealing with employee issues, I insist that we develop three or four strategies in case one or two aren't successful.

Learn from mistakes

Finally, look at the past for the sole purpose of preparing for the future. How did your organization handle a crisis? What mistakes did you make with your workforce, and how do you plan to avoid those mistakes in the future? Always remember that without employees, there is no organization. We live in some of the most challenging times in our country's history. How organizational leaders plan for these challenges is what determines how their employees fare.



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