

# Leading in Uncertainty

## What's Important Now?

By Andrea Chilcote

*We know that companies can't depend on the predictability of the environment – and perhaps never will be able to again. So how can leaders engage their people in a journey toward a positive vision of the future? From where do they draw that kind of energy in its apparent absence? The answer is found inside of each individual leader. And it often involves a facedown with one's own integrity.*



Just before the economic down-turn, attracting and retaining talent was the strategy of the moment for businesses large and small. Leaders were finally getting it that growing, thriving, successful businesses are dependent on people, and the quality of the management of those people.

Did the “people” focus end when the economy crashed? Emphatically, I say that the challenge did not disappear and to lose focus is short-sighted. If employees were tough to “motivate” two years ago, the task is even tougher in the face of workforce reductions, budget slashes and

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the presence of fear and uncertainty that hangs in the air. The need for performance and productivity is perhaps more critical now, as some companies fight for survival versus market dominance or Wall Street's blessing.

Endless research points out that engaged, loyal, productive employees understand what's expected of them, feel their talents are being utilized/maximized, their opinions matter and that their job is "important." They value feedback and opportunities to grow.

To many of us, those management behaviors appear to be common sense. As well, they are backed up by potent Gallup Research – groundbreaking, cross-industry studies that investigated links between employee opinions and business unit performance. The result of the research? The employees that responded more positively to the factors noted worked in business units with higher levels of productivity, profitability, employee retention and customer satisfaction. Employees from different business units in the same company often responded differently, suggesting that the opinions were being formed by the employee's relationship with the immediate manager rather than the company itself.

This was big news for companies trying to attract and retain employees in an era when unemployment was at record lows. Then, unmotivated, unfulfilled or disgruntled employees voted with their feet and

left for greener pastures. Companies employed a myriad of strategies to motivate and retain key talent, from typical short-term incentives to serious attempts at improving the quality of the leadership and thus the quality of the work culture.

Spencer Johnson, author of the bestseller *Who Moved My Cheese* was quoted in *USA Today* as saying he has long contemplated whether motivational strategies work (even as his motivational book has sold 3 million copies and countless half-day seminars costing \$895 each.) Then he said something risky. He said that he believes that someday research will show that the only long lasting motivation will come from workers who "bring motivation with them." He refers to that motivation in the form of "spirituality or something that causes them to rise to a higher purpose."

Through my work I have learned that leaders who are effective in retaining productive, loyal employees and do all the right things in terms of tactical management strategies, tend to also be working with purpose and meaning. They have personal vision, passion and integrity, as well as a sense of the need to help their people share in it and identify it for themselves.

Men and women in organizations today are searching for meaning,

work that has purpose. It's visible to the naked eye – but again, it's also backed up by research. The Hay Group identified "meaning" as the number one motivator. Now granted, there are varying definitions of meaning – for example, it can be as simple as really "getting" how one's job affects a greater goal. But be careful assuming that just because employees can see how their job impacts a company objective, they will be on board and driven to achieve it. There is so much more to it than that. It has to be personal. They have to be co-creators of the goals and vision. Their opinion has to count. And, they have to see that there is consistency between their values, standards and style, and those of the organization – and especially those of the immediate supervisor. Employees today want to be their whole self at work, and are no longer willing to compartmentalize that self from the way they earn a living, if they are to be performing at their optimal level.

I won't argue that talent may be easier to attract today than two years ago. Even in the midst of economic uncertainty, people are willing to move to find what they are searching for – meaning and fit. But finding talent is only one piece of the problem. Performance in the face of uncertainty is the charge of the moment.

My premise is that if we are to deal with the root cause for problems with productivity and performance today, we have to start asking leaders questions about purpose, integrity, and the ways in which they communicate those things.

Last year, a company that I founded conducted a survey of its clients. When leaders were asked: How well can you articulate the fundamental vision and purpose of the business or business unit you lead? 43% said: I know it clearly myself but don't always openly speak it or show it. Yet almost every respondent agreed with the statement: It's the leaders job to co-create shared vision, purpose and values with employees and stakeholders, and to manage the paradox between personal meaning and company mission. Now how can they do that if they don't model it or even talk about it?

Not surprisingly, 78% said: My personal values, purpose and identity are strongly linked to my work. These same people, when asked; How excited or passionate are you about the work you do? responded very favorably.

Amazingly, when asked the question: To what extent does your work currently force you to compromise closely held beliefs, principles or values, 35% responded: At times we all have to subordinate our own values. I draw your attention to that number not as an indictment of the ethics of that 35%, but as something else to consider. The people surveyed may have been willing to sub-

ordinate themselves – but I don't believe that the people we are counting on for the success of our businesses are as willing to compromise themselves as they once were. The world has indeed changed, and people are again speaking with their feet, this time often leaving for very different careers or jobs that allow them to focus on their whole life, not just their career. Or, even more dangerously, they are "leaving," checking out mentally and emotionally, yet staying in their positions.

Employees want to be who they are at work. For them to demonstrate loyalty to a company, there has to be a compelling reason – one that is more meaningful than their surface wants. It is much more than casual dress or flexible hours. My belief is that in order to facilitate an atmosphere in which employees feel purposeful and driven to achieve a company's objectives, the leader must first define that vision and purpose for himself or herself, in a way that is real and compelling. It is my belief that most leaders spend far too little time deeply contemplating these issues, and that when they do they are doing the very creative work that makes companies, (units, divisions, products) form and grow, innovate and transform.

So how can leaders engage their people in a journey toward a positive vision of the future? From where do they draw that

kind of energy in its apparent absence? The answer is found inside of each individual leader. And it often involves a facedown with one's own integrity!

Many people I work with at all levels – leaders of companies, of business units, of teams – are involved in a search, from the inside out, to express their personal vision, passion, talents and voice through their work. It is my belief that only by leading from this level of integrity can managers engage the minds and hearts of the workforce. It is only from this place that leaders can act as role models to free others to do likewise.

Ownership, accountability and authority can be shared by every person at every level of the organization.



How can something so powerful happen? When leaders engage in this degree of self-dialogue and self-discovery, and real communication with the people around them, they come face to face with their own integrity. A mirror appears, reflecting the consistency (or lack of) between what one believes and how one acts. If all the research is correct; if people want to be themselves, contribute their unique skills and talents on the job, and work in an environment where giving and receiving respectful feedback is valued, then leaders absolutely must look in that mirror. Everyone who calls himself or herself a manager of people must look at how they “show up,” how closely what they do matches what they say, how motivated or fulfilled they are in their work, and how clear their own vision is at any given moment.

- Business is in a permanent state of chaotic flux. Creating a culture of strategic unity and performance focus in the face of external turmoil and employee burn-out is the issue of the moment.

- You can't lead people to places you don't want to go yourself. If at any given moment you don't have a compelling picture of the future that you yourself are passionate about, your unit or organization is at risk.

- People expect leaders (and likewise organizations) to stand for something. Then they decide if there is fit between their personal values and those of the leader. They search for the link between the fundamental purpose of the organization and

who they are. Leaders absolutely must concern themselves with this dynamic.

- People respond to who we are, not who we say we are. It's the meaning of integrity. Businesses are traditionally hard-headed yet so many failures in business are due to refusing to acknowledge or even recognize weakness. Leaders who face their fears and vulnerabilities emerge freer, more creative and more able to forge meaningful relationships with others.

Leaders and their companies do not get tested in “up” economies. You could argue that the behaviors I have discussed in this article are the very work of leadership at any time, yet now, quality of leadership is a survival factor. I find it interesting that many companies are, in this tenuous economy, investing in processes and programs that help leaders engage in both transformational leadership development (creating strategic alignment personally and for the business) and tactical management training (communication, feedback,

relationship-building) while others are pulling back, viewing it as a luxury for good times.

There is overwhelming evidence that hope spurs on achievement, but most people are not full of hope. In one survey of 7000 employees, only 40% had both the will and the way – two basic ingredients of hope – for achieving their goals.

Leaders at all levels must be concerned with this statistic. Will is not external, and these 7000 employees will not get “turned on” to perform because a manager tells them to. But they will respond to leaders who engage in honest dialogue, know what they want for the organization and themselves, and act from that knowledge.

People respond to who we are, not who we say we are. It's called integrity. You can't lead people to places you don't want to go yourself.

#### **Andrea Chilcote, founder of Morningstar Ventures**

Andrea has more than 14 years experience in performance-based change management with companies in diverse business sectors. She works with Fortune 500 companies to guide the leadership development aspect of large scale change efforts. She formed Morningstar Ventures to help today's companies create sustainable change in performance by influencing and enhancing leadership. Andrea is recognized industry-wide having authored numerous development programs throughout her career. She received her Bachelor of Science from Millikin University, her Consulting Practices Certification from the Meridian Institute, and she completed graduate studies at University of Kentucky, Lexington.

