

# A New Recipe for Lemonade: Simple Ways to Thrive in Turbulent Times

By Andrea Chilcote and Susan Reece, PhD.

A daunting business problem seems to be lingering in the face of the dismal economic climate of the past two years. Unlike the seemingly intractable problems like the credit crunch, the housing meltdown and the stock market plunge of the past, this one just might be something that leaders – and people at every level of an organization – can do something about. Now.

No question about it, the world around us is in chaos. Even if your business is strong and your job is stable, chances are you're worried about something. Maybe your sister-in-law just lost her job and health benefits on the eve of her son's dire medical diagnosis. Maybe you are caring for an aging parent whose nest egg has vanished in the stock market decline and now you have a financial burden in addition to a physical and emotional one. Perhaps you can't point to any one thing that's causing you anxiety, except the fact that everyone else seems stressed out so you're literally feeding on their fear. And finally, if you are not worried at all, chances are someone on your team is, someone upon whom you rely to achieve your business goals. What if the biggest drain on employee productivity was worry, stress and anxiety, real or imagined? Would you know what action to take to address it?

The fact is there are tangible steps that individuals can take and there are processes leaders can follow to assess the pulse of anxiety and positively affect the mindset, behavior and impact of their followers.

"I am not invalidating your problems, I am validating your ability to rise above them."

Marianne Williamson

We must face the fact that the world condition and with it our personal condition are no longer either good or bad, stable or unstable. History provides countless examples of people that found silver linings in adversity, reframed it or rose above it. This suggests that we literally do create our own reality. It's a "both/and" situation; hardship and opportunity co-exist. Leadership courage involves acknowledging the gravity of the challenges while appealing to team members' resourcefulness and the fundamental human desire to thrive. We each have to reframe our fear and stress. If not we risk creating more of the very thing we fear. We can vaccinate ourselves from the contagion of group anxiety by recognizing our own fear, testing its validity in the current moment, stopping our ruminating thoughts and reaffirming our own control by taking positive action on something that makes a difference right now.

## **Take Action**

The simple (but not always easy) method for shifting a mindset is to take action. Yesterday a colleague relayed what she told a friend: "Stop talking about how bad it is and freaking yourself out. Just define exactly what you want and need, then decide what steps you need to take to get it and take them." The directive jolted her friend into action.

What one thing can you do right now, today? You can't change the dollar value showing on your 401(k) statement, but you can do your best work today to make yourself a valuable employee. You can't change the fact that you have been furloughed, but you can choose to learn one new thing that will enhance your performance when you return to your job. Stop a moment, take your power back and do something positive in your life. How? Read on.

## **Manage Your Mind**

You can't afford the luxury of a bad thought. We point to the well-worn adage not to wax philosophical in the style of Norman Vincent Peale, but rather to point out a practical reality. You really can't afford a bad thought. Worry and anxiety are conditions of the mind, not of the moment. The moment is precious, and it's the only thing you ever have, really. The human brain is very clever. You can sit in a marketing meeting, nod at the presenter, all the while considering how you might juggle the expenses for your son's tuition with the vacation you promised your husband, still paying the monthly bills. Then, when you're

home having dinner with your son supposedly listening to him recount his day, you're thinking about the same presentation and wondering if your response was smart enough when your boss asked for your opinion about the new campaign. Wasted, misdirected precious time. A practice called "thought stopping" can be used to break up the repetitive negative thoughts that run through our heads. If you find yourself focused on doom and gloom, say or yell the word "stop" to shift your consciousness to an awareness of what you are focused on. Then have a plan to move the momentum in a different direction.

### **Consider What's Important**

Worry generates more worry. Anyone who has awakened in the middle of the night wrestling with a personal or business decision knows the truth in this. What starts as a singular, legitimate concern mushrooms, as flotsam and jetsam from daily life enters the mix. "Should I offer the reassignment to Helen or Maria?"..."Oh, speaking of Helen – our meeting ran late and I forgot to pick up the dry cleaning."..."Cleaning?? My in-laws arrive Thursday!" And so it goes, maybe for an hour or more.

Volumes have been written on managing priorities. Never before has clarity about one's priorities been more important. During more rational moments (not at 3 am!), make a series of lists. Capture, in writing, the activities that make you happy, the people and things you value the most, or your top ten priorities this year. You can even make a list of the things you can control, in this environment in which so much seems out of control. The next time a small worry morphs into anxiety, pull out the lists and pick one thing to do. Then do it – it's that simple.

With your family or with teams you lead, take a pulse check of the general anxiety level. Acknowledge that market and other conditions are affecting all of us and then ask, "What can we do to stay focused on the things that will make us successful?" Agree to respectfully "call out" negativity that impedes forward momentum.

### **You Can Never Solve a Problem on the Level at Which it was Created**

Here's a practical way to apply Albert Einstein's sage wisdom. Let's say your problem is real, not presumed, and it matters, to you. You can avoid it, accept it, or transcend it. "Avoiding" is the condition of turning a blind eye. It's an irresponsible position that almost always magnifies the issue. As repugnant as that sounds, we do it all the time. The severity ranges from a busy mother ignoring a suspicious engine noise to a fifty-something middle manager who fails to maintain technology skills and finds himself unemployable. "Accepting" sounds like the noble antithesis. Endure, and this too shall pass. What if you could actually transform a problem into an opportunity by examining it with a new lens? By definition, the word "transcend" implies we rise above or go beyond the limits of a problem or "triumph over" the negative or restrictive aspects of it. Recently, when asked "How are things going?" a friend replied: "I'm looking for new recipes for making lemonade."

One of the reasons we get stuck in a funk, whether it's one bad day or clinical depression, is that we can't see our way out because we are so firmly located in it. Perspective, the kind that sparks innovation, creativity and broader, richer understandings must be actively sought out. Physically, mentally and emotionally remove yourself from the matter at hand. Paint the basement, play a round of golf, go for a long walk, or just find a reason to laugh. Consult a friend who will neither agree with you nor empathize, then consider, rather than reject, what he or she has to say. Detachment allows you to see the truth. And the truth, as the saying goes, is the only thing that will set you free.

Today, we all need a new recipe for lemonade.