



Leading Constructively in Tough Times

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***Courageous
Leaders***

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Introduction

“Is it too hard to be constructive in these tough economic times?” We have heard many leaders ask this question or worse still resort to the “tough” leadership style they believe is necessary to see them through these tough economic times.

We acknowledge how it is hard and yet essential to have the courage to use constructive leadership - remain constructive and see how people do more with less, go the extra mile and bring their personal best.

All business leaders we speak to from a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience acknowledge the “*holding pattern*” we have gone into – decisions are being postponed, delayed and even if they are made implementation is generally slow. And this is happening with the undercurrent of cost saving – and for many organisations this undercurrent is very obvious and for others it is hidden deep and sweeps you up and out when you least expect it.

People are being catalysed onto the Downward Spiral of Fear as their leaders resort to the fearful strategy of cost cutting instead of the more courageous strategy of finding new “blue ocean” revenue streams – and even better still generating new business models. This kind of thinking and strategy development requires leaders to unleash their courage – it means embracing the feeling of vulnerability.

Experience how being constructive is different from being positive. Bringing realism to your conversations is vital and this means looking at both the positive and the negative. It means embracing the Upward Spiral of Courage where business leaders approach issues and problems constructively with interest, creativity and integrity. They facilitate the thinking of others so that they can come to work and enthusiastically embrace their future, develop themselves and approach problems with creativity rather than constraint and fear

Tough Times

We asked business leaders to describe the current tough times:

- Uncertainty around the US economy and its impact on us, so our leaders are resisting significant changes as they are concerned about implications
- On-going pressure on margins and so are looking for ways to produce more with less and we hear that leaders are being asked to “sweat the assets”
- Shrinking volume and increased competition from sources not normally considered so
- Continued advancement of digital change and the uncertainty of how to integrate it into existing business models
- Reservations about the outcome of the National election in September



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Bunkering Down

During tough times we see leaders bunkering down with the aim of doing more themselves to create success for the business. They feel uncertain, they feel worried, they feel concerned and in terms of fight or flight – they are flying away from engaging in conversations with the people in the business. They opt rather for activity with the intent of fixing the situation. So often if leaders have nothing positive to say about organisational performance they say nothing at all. However the silence exacerbates the uncertainty and fear that many people feel. In a funny way the silence serves as a

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method of control for the leader – it means they don't have to expose their feelings and thoughts and refrain from being vulnerable with the individuals in their team. Silence becomes

our best 'cover' as we busy ourselves with the external world of customers and developing new business. This is at the expense of engaging in conversations internally. If 'bunkering down' during tough times can be avoided – so too can the fear that uncertainty generates. We see leaders bunkering down because they don't know how to share their thoughts and feelings about the:

- Current situation
- Possible obstacles to performance
- Projected outcomes
- Risks
- Opportunities.

The Current Situation

Leaders don't know how to be honest about the reality of the current situation – especially when it is not where they expected the organisation to be. The bunkering down happens because their ego cannot engage in such a conversation; they don't want to risk being blamed for the current situation; or even worse being asked about it. They believe it is better to put your head down and get on with it – no need for talk; it is not going to change things and so is a waste of time. Such an approach makes no room for discussion, problem solving, collaboration or support – all of which can lead to new ideas, solutions and a motivated team. Instead everyone feels isolated, helpless, exposed and maybe even angry.

Possible Obstacles to performance

With the heads down approach we don't have conversations about possible obstacles. People are too scared to share their thoughts and ideas and so they go underground. The 'grapevine' becomes active and detracts from energy needed for performance. Uncertainty increases and manifests itself in more rumours. With the fear and uncertainty the reactive behaviours are likely to be aggressive with a focus on the task rather than the people.



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Projected Outcomes

When bunkering down leaders fail to provide information on goals, what the organisation is striving to achieve and therefore how individuals can assist in achieving these goals. Out of fear these leaders refrain from engaging in such conversations – they don't want to have to answer the tough questions – like will there be retrenchments? Instead everyone continues to play it safe and does what they have always done without asking why or why not. This won't necessarily help improve the current situation, it won't motivate for high performance, it certainly keeps potential and talent buried deep and may even mean that people work counter-intuitively to the end goal because they have no idea what it is they are trying to achieve.

Risks

When leaders bunker down they don't want to talk about the risks. Their fear gets in the way of such transparency and this means individuals in their teams are not given the full context for the situation. Trust starts to get eroded and trusted relationships within their team are negatively impacted. Stress and anxiety bubble up into your relationships and lead to highly tense interactions between people. Cross functionally leaders stop sharing with each other - competition is high – with each person having a strong need to remain on top and in control....."I'm OK Jack" is the motto here!

Opportunities

When leaders bunker down they are unable to see the opportunities presented to them. They are unable to bring an abundant mind set and explore creatively how to develop and stretch people. They are probably unable to even see beyond the immediate task that needs to be completed in order to secure short term bottom line contribution.

Information and support leads to trust, engagement, motivation and higher performance and it avoids rumour, gossip and negative behaviours that stifle potential. Being 'in the know' and pulling together as a team trumps deafening silence and uncertainty every time. Nobody works in a perfect vacuum – and nobody wants to feel alone and unsupported, particularly during tougher business climates. Information and support is needed at all levels of the organisation – even leaders need it - and to acknowledge the need builds trusted relationships and stronger performing teams, and therefore stronger, trusted organisations. So resist the temptation to bunker down and instead use constructive behaviours to ignite the potential of everyone in the business to achieve the best possible results in the tough times.



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What Does Leading Constructively Mean?

We easily bounce around the term 'leading constructively' and assume it is universally understood. But in terms of actions and behaviours, what does leading constructively actually mean for a leader?

It is very easy during these tough economic times to protect ourselves and resort to aggression ('fight') – it has worked historically and is renowned for getting quick results.

When resorting to such aggressive behaviours leaders tend to use their positional power to demand action, they operate from a place of control and so demand compliance from others and they generally oppose new ideas for fear they do not work.

Everyone resorts to protecting their jobs, their reputations and their results. Such tactics *can* work in the short run – generating performance through fear of job loss or other retribution can make people step up and do what they are told.

However it is at the expense of trusted relationships and you also importantly miss out on the untapped potential that is not released as people are too busy doing what they are told and putting energy into fleeing from the fear. They forget to look for better ways to do things and their energy is too low to work productively.

During these tough times leaders are being asked to do such things as cut expenses, 'sweat' assets, not replace people who leave, even retrench people and increase revenue (while customers are also cutting expenses). So what kind of constructive behaviour can you use when leading others in such times and still keep your job? Quite simply leaders need to:

- Be clear on where they are going
- Know what kind of leader they want to be
- Encourage, support and believe in the people they want to come along with them
- Care deeply about the people they are bringing along.

Be clear on where they are going

Leaders especially need to have real conversations and agree what is realistically possible and what results are achievable. They need to encourage in others a focus on delivering high quality results by taking the time to understand the motivations, values and strengths of their team members. Once the leader is clear on where we are going it is then important to share the responsibility for actually getting there. The shared responsibility from a practical perspective means more gets done with no



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Constructive

The definition of constructive in the Oxford Dictionary is *"positive, helpful"* and on Dictionary.com *"helping to improve; promoting further development or advancement"*.

It makes sense then doesn't it, that during tough economic times leaders should be operating with a view to improvement, development and positivity – of both the organisation and the people?

bottle necks created, team members are aware of their tasks and the outcomes they are responsible for. This takes courage – the leader may be challenged to let go of control and increase transparency.

Know what kind of leader they want to be

During tough times it is particularly important to get in touch with the kind of leader you really want to be – because such times can bring to the surface feelings of fear, uncertainty and stress.

Acknowledging these thoughts and feelings, being aware of them and discussing them not only have the benefit of allaying some of them, but also of building stronger relationships between people in your organisation. People are increasingly demanding that their leaders are authentic – they do not want to work with facades!

Leaders need to have a healthy respect and belief in the talents and abilities of their team members. They then actively encourage working together to successfully marry these talents and abilities for the good of others and the organisation. They are open to possibility and opportunity - linking to the idea of collaboration and being open to ideas and viewpoints of others to encourage creative, imaginative solutions to problems. Ultimately they are going to come from an abundant mind set rather than one of scarcity and fear.

Encourage, support and believe in the people they want to come along with them

Those who care about others, who encourage them to improve and who assist in fulfilling potential make excellent leaders in good times and bad. A willingness to take time with people, having optimism about what individuals in their team can accomplish and concentrating on nurturing each individual relationship inspires and motivates more than any profit figure or salary ever can. During tough times this is even more critical to the success of an organisation.

To encourage, support and believe means as the leader you ask questions to help others come up with their own solutions, demonstrate a belief in what others can accomplish through delegating and stretching their skills and experience, listen to suggestions, comments and feedback and importantly you act or reflect upon it with respect and gratitude.

Care deeply about the people they are bringing along

Care deeply and you demonstrate the value you place in people and relationships with them. To care deeply is to share thoughts and feelings no matter how hard it is to do so and no matter how scared you feel; and to invite others to do the same without fear of retribution or judgement. Do this as a leader and you help others to feel worthwhile and significant – and more willing to put in the extra effort that may be required to achieve the results you seek?

Making the time, investing the energy and creating the vulnerability to build these relationships will outlast even the toughest economic times and carry trust, success and high performance within the organisation into the highly sustainable future.



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Vulnerability

Vulnerability is all about **being real** – sharing what you are really thinking and feeling about the tough economic times and the future direction of the business and the future/continued employment of each of the people who report to you. This is exactly what we need our leaders to be exhibiting during tough times. We need leaders who are prepared to be vulnerable and lead constructively rather than bunkering down with their armour and weapons for protection.

It is about being prepared to sit and really listen to people as they share what they are thinking and feeling. It is about dropping any façade you may have built up over the years. This requires you to move beyond your ego. As a leader you are completely uncertain about the result or outcome that will arise from such sharing. However in our experience when leaders are real; other people can't

help but eventually respond and empathize in a real way and this brings outcomes you may never have realised were possible.

"The courage to be vulnerable means taking off the armour we use to protect ourselves, putting down the weapons we use to keep people at a distance, showing up and letting ourselves be seen."
~Brené Brown ([watch her here](#))

Allow yourself to be vulnerable and share things to expose the real you. To do this you need to drop your ego - the part of you that likes to ensure you "look good" regardless of the impact on your relationships. Your ego encourages you to look good, save face and refrain from looking weak....and so you choose to take flight or to fight.

Be vulnerable; expose your very real thoughts and feelings. Share what you don't know and share what you are scared of - and remember this is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of real strength and it is highly

constructive. Speak from the heart and you engage in a very real way with each other. You create the exponential possibilities.

Vulnerability challenges you and asks you to draw on the most courageous part of yourself. Such courage allows you to be the best version of you and believe me we desperately need the best version of you during these tough economic times. Take the armour off and embrace your vulnerability by:

1. **Being aware:** that you will feel vulnerable and instead of pushing it away, move toward it
2. **Being present:** with the intense emotions that arise when you experience such vulnerability and allows yourself some space to check-in with why the feelings are so intense – notice the defensive routine that has triggered you
3. **Letting go:** of these feelings so you can be ready to move forward constructively
4. **Realising:** that after you let go comes the empowerment to choose who you want to be and how you want to behave.



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Constructive leadership qualities

During tough economic climates or during times of organisational change we are catalysed onto the Downward Spiral of Fear and it is the leaders who will force the change onto the Upward Spiral of Courage.

To steer the organisation through the eye of the storm bring these five 'courageous and constructive' leadership qualities out in the forefront of your everyday interactions with each individual in your organisation. Hone and be conscious of your ability to:

1. Engage openly in conversations
2. Be vulnerable
3. Look 'realistically' into the future
4. Avoid the propensity to 'bunker down'
5. Connect and commit to the future of each individual who reports to you and to the organisation.

Leaders who are able to refine these leadership qualities during tough times benefit from an organisation of creative, innovative and collaborative team members – who commit to doing more with less.

Actions to focus on at a personal level

Hold yourself accountable when you return to your organisation by being conscious of HOW you are:

1. Thinking and acting courageously
2. Engaging each individual who reports directly to you
3. Committing to on-going self-development as a leader – starting with reflective thinking
4. Having real conversations with people
5. Giving and receiving feedback without fear of defensiveness
6. Living your values and staying true to the kind of leader you really want to be and the business needs you to be
7. Building emotional resilience and mindfulness.

To find out how Courageous Leaders can partner you in leading constructively in tough times, visit www.courageousleaders.com.au and contact us.



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