

The Heart of Change is Employee Engagement

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These are exceptional times. Though written before, this time it's not for dramatic effect. While hyperbole is undoubtedly in great abundance these days, much of what is currently being experienced in the United States and around the globe is unprecedented in terms of magnitude, speed, pervasiveness, and the complex interrelations between countries' economies. While one would not go so far as to describe a *new world order*, this is, at a minimum, a season of *watershed change*.

In light of these contemporary realities, a great amount of research and tools – specifically, in the areas of *self-management* and *organizational leadership during distress* – has become more germane than in decades past. Also of great interest is the notion of *employee engagement*, which has been unilaterally debilitated in too many organizations.

And what tumultuousness recent weeks have wrought. A new Presidential Administration is in office and election night '08 seems a distant memory. In many ways, 2009 slipped in with a serious virus – industry is down, unemployment is up, and public policies are more complicated than ever before. Michigan, Ohio, California, Florida...many states are in cardiac arrest, and all the while the global economic community looks to America for salves and solutions that sometimes seem to transcend do-ability. As is often the case with the human spirit, there is an abiding hopefulness and inkling of possibility despite the morass of challenges that squeeze the earth like a python.

Amid these tribulations and opportunities, what is a leader to do? And how might one go about reconciling the perennial “paradox of change” – the reality that *when organizations need their fewer, remaining employees the most focused, they are generally the most distracted?* What the world needs now is leaders; leaders who can effectively cast a vision, communicate with clarity, unite followers, and manage the myriad constellation of work under their charge. These leaders will frequently rise unexpectedly from overlooked nooks and crannies. Disregarding one's political persuasion, such has been the case throughout history. Lincoln, both Roosevelts, Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Wilson, Truman, Polk...in many ways an unexpected cast of characters, among whom initial obscurity was not an altogether rare denominator. A good reminder that no rocks should remain unturned when searching for leaders-in-waiting.

Once identified and at the helm of a boat in a storm, any competent captain must catalyze crew engagement through a Unifying Purpose, Inclusion, and Success Chunking.

An adequate **unifying purpose** serves to dissolve individual and interpersonal differences and create a more transcendent calling. Though not true in the literal sense, it's the team equivalent of the "no atheists in foxholes" expression. What a unifying purpose does so elegantly and efficiently is *bring people together*. This is equivalent to the powerful reality of open and self-organizing systems like flocks of birds, schools of fish, swarms of bees/ants/termites, a river, spontaneous magnetization, turbulence, convection, avalanches, hurricanes, forest fires, tectonic shifts, traffic jams, epidemics, fractals, friction, or e-Bay. Once a unifying purpose begins and gathers force, its potential is tremendous. Unifying purposes arise, often organically and quickly, and sometimes as the result of a catalyst – a leader. Like a meme (any idea seemingly transmitted from one person or generation to another), these purposes (e.g., freedom, hope, meaning) sweep away numerous barriers and usher in more multiplicative means of working together.

The power of **inclusion** can be summed up with the reality that "people don't resist their own ideas." Great leaders seek to explore and exploit truths that already exist; to satiate hungers that pine beneath the surface. As has been said, "One cannot create thirst, but one can provide water." The very best leaders work tirelessly to capitalize on others' potential and energy by drawing them in, weaving their DNA into the organizational photo album, and allowing them to experience the Lao Tzu maxim, "When we succeed, the people will say, 'We did this ourselves.'"

And finally, in the face of tumultuousness, leaders help followers overcome one of the greatest mind-traps: the perception of despair or impossibility. This brings to mind the adage, "Whether one thinks he can or cannot, he is right." Rather than buying in, followers opt out. Rather than standing up, they fall back. But leaders worth their salt are vigorous to create **successes**, and often in tiny chunks. By focusing on tasks, projects, and pursuits that are do-able and ensuring that followers feel "a win," they flywheel this inertia into subsequent wins and build victory after victory. Such is the case in battles that win wars, in technological innovations built upon initially absurd math theorems, and in the heliocentric concept of the solar system – which was originally crafted on the wrongheaded belief that the earth was the proverbial center of the universe. To get to "success," one often postulates heresies that challenge the status quo yet which ultimately lead to revelatory progress.



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