

# Ten Timely Leadership Traits for Transitioning Turbulent Times

By Bette Price, CMC

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When uncertainties face business leaders, one thing is certain: leaders must address both their employees' livelihoods and their lives. Not only have many organizations been stunned economically, their people have been traumatized emotionally—some shaken to their quick, thrust into a state of deep soul searching, wondering if the stress of their jobs is worth it. Among those who salvaged their jobs, some may appear grateful to be employed, but are they? The question is, will the best-of-the-best stay where they are when the economy recovers? Or will they be among the first to seek higher ground? The answer is--it depends on how leadership handles the people side of business. The following ten leadership traits will serve leaders well not just during this uncertain time of transition, but consider it exactly what's needed for the most effective leadership model moving forward:

## 1. **Show passion for your business, its purpose and its people**

Without passion for your business and its purpose, it's easy to become complaisant and routine which does little to motivate performance in others, let alone stimulate your own growth. David Walker, Comptroller General of the United States, makes no bones about being passionate for his employees. "In the knowledge-based economy, the most important by far is the people dimension," Walker says. In a knowledge-based economy you must compete on productivity and innovation. The key to that competition, Walker says, is the people dimension. "At the GAO for example, 83 percent of our costs represent people costs," he says. "One hundred percent of our assets are people assets."

Since nothing gets done in any business unless people make it happen, it is also critical to demonstrate that you genuinely care about your people. Simple gestures such as merely greeting everyone as you enter their work area; stopping occasionally to engage

in small talk; asking others for their opinion, and taking the time to send personal handwritten notes when people have accomplished something special. All take little time yet pay big dividends in establishing genuine rapport.

When leaders demonstrate a genuine passion for their people and their contributions people are more likely to feel valued, thus be willing take risks to perform.

## 2. **Think more strategically than tactically**

Beyond big picture, visionary thinking, leaders need systemic thinking to fit all the pieces together to accomplish the desired results of their new and visionary thinking. Strategic thinkers think in possibilities, seeing what is not yet visible to others. And, they have an uncanny ability to sift through volumes of data and selectively ferret out meaningful information to spot important trends and then put all the pieces together. Once strategy is developed, have the confidence to turn over the implementation to those who are more tactically oriented. Be comfortable to let go. That requires a healthy ego. Setting one's ego aside allows for others to contribute to the process. It also opens the door to hearing other's views, which helps to combine ideas which can expand and enhance the original thinking.

## 3. **Listen to learn, then lead**

Leaders don't necessarily have to be charismatic, but they must be compelling in their ability to help others embrace the cultural values that drive the organization's success. That requires more than the ability to verbally communicate. Even more importantly, it requires the ability to listen—intently listen. By listening, leaders empower. Listening for diversity of thinking encourages collaboration. Listening at all levels of the organization fosters openness and sharing of ideas. Listening provides the opportunity to give the gift of meaningful feedback—a gift that enables everyone to feel valued and grow.

#### **4. Treat Learning Like Dirty Dishes**

Linda Huett, CEO of Weight Watchers International coined this phrase. Learning is like dirty dishes in that “you never finish in terms of your own development,” she says. True. Leaders who convey passion the best are humble enough to realize they don’t know it all. They honor the talents of the people around them by engaging them purposefully at all levels, knowing that the distance between the front line and the senior leadership team may be so great that one small piece of information may have tremendous impact. Move about. Be visible and be approachable. Encourage dialogue and ask what people think. When you incorporate other’s ideas, be sure to give credit where credit is due. In your quest for continual learning you will build loyalty and people will feel more secure.

#### **5. Do What’s Right and Tell The Truth**

During times of uncertainty, people need to know that a leader is making just and right decisions. A major function of that is telling the truth. Telling the truth may require admitting that you don’t have all the answers at the time or that because of legal implications you are unable to reveal certain information at the specific time. That, in fact, is telling the truth if it is the truth. Telling the truth enables people to move forward with faith in the face of uncertainties and gives them hope. When people lack information, they tend to fill in the gaps anyway—often with the wrong information. During times of uncertainty, misinformation can intensify a difficult situation. Knowing something is better than knowing nothing.

#### **6. Create Trust**

As trite as it may seem, there has been so much erosion of trust over the past decade that no one can underestimate the importance of creating a trusting environment. During times of uncertainty, the need for trust intensifies. Trust enhances commitment. Trust encourages risk taking. Trust enables people to deal more realistically and effectively with both good and bad news. If there is trust, there is understanding, thus loyalty and accountability can prevail. Establishing trust starts with telling the truth. Other trust builders include being consistent. Don't allow one person to be late constantly while punishing another for the same thing. Don't talk about expected performance required for advancement and then promote someone who hasn't demonstrated that performance. Actions do speak louder than words and you're people will definitely be watching during difficult times.

### **7. Demonstrate genuine care for your people**

Recognizing natural strengths and capitalizing on them is one of the greatest ways for a leader to demonstrate care for his or her people. Rather than expecting the same from each individual in a particular role, look for the uniqueness that each individual brings to the role—then acknowledge and reward it. Eliminate blame. Replace blame with a process for evaluating mistakes from a learning perspective and use it as an opportunity for fostering trust and potential growth. Engage in moments of small talk to convey your genuine interest in people as multi-faceted individuals, and take time to be visible and sensitive to emotional needs during times of heightened crisis. Remember, you mirror the emotion of the organization and during the most turbulent time, your job as a leader is to comfort the worries of those more jarred than you.

### **8. Follow your gut instinct**

Intuition cannot be taught, nor does it hold much esteem in academic circles. Nevertheless, in critical times the best of the best admit they follow gut instinct. Perhaps the

best guidance to following gut instinct, intuition, or whatever you may call it is to follow the advise of Kip Tindell, cofounder of The Container Store who says “intuition comes to a prepared mind.” When quick, important decisions must be made, draw upon past experience, look at the facts, and weigh the risks. When all is said and done, even when the facts indicate “no,” if your gut says “yes,” the yes route is likely the best route to go.

### **9. Encourage your people to risk**

The ultimate challenge for leaders is to balance the risk of absorbing uncertainty with the capacity at which the organization’s people can function without suffering burnout or dysfunction. In times of stress people will tend to be more cautious about taking risks, yet it may be exactly the time risk-taking is most important. The leader’s role is to cushion the risk by providing support and encouragement. Then when your people have been willing to challenge the status quo, celebrate it, acknowledge it, and champion it.

### **10. Honor the importance of balance**

During times of uncertainty, encouraging your people to live a balanced life may seem out of the question. Yet when a leader fails to encourage some element of balance, the organization often suffers greatly by incurring hidden costs from sick days, mistakes, and people becoming so burned out that they are unable to give the job their very best.

Times of uncertainty call for a leaders to demonstrate a delicate mix of sensitivity with steely determination and drive, yet to clearly let people know that they are valued and cared about above the bottom line. Those who accomplish the task will be supported and followed; they will be seen as leaders. Those who treat business as usual, solely focusing on the bottom line, will risk alienating employees and merely be seen as “the boss.” Which will be you?

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