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5 Ways to Lead in Challenging Times

In a time of unprecedented challenge, leaders don't just need to lead their companies. They also need to lead themselves.



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IMAGE: Getty Images

What do leaders do when their stock price has dropped 75 percent and it's their job to get it back up? What should leaders think when the thrilling vision they had for the future has been clouded by economic uncertainty? How do leaders get inspired when their employees are dejected, worried, and distracted--and let's face it, on some level so are they?

Wait--don't answer that. You can't.

Because no matter how much you know about leadership, regardless of what the research says or what best practice implies, there's only one way to find the right answers to these questions. Leaders need to find them for themselves.

In a time of unprecedented challenge, leaders don't just need to lead their companies. They also need to lead themselves. They need strategies for improving their effectiveness while sustaining a sense of professional well-being. Every one of us has an internal source of strength and stability. Without care and consideration these renewable resources are seriously at risk.

In order to survive and thrive, leaders can't just go about business as usual. Business isn't "usual" anymore. It's undergoing a seismic shift. Leaders need to get their footing in a shaky reality and learn to embrace the possibilities ahead.

So how does a leader actually practice personal leadership? What do they need to do? It looks like this:

Take time to think. Leaders need to step out of the daily rush and think about what they're doing and why. Doing so, they will find the clarity and focus they need to get back into the action in the most effective way.

Look inside. Instead of being driven by the demanding urgencies, leaders can discover their inner resources--their strengths, their values, and their aspirations. Take for example, the leadership practice of visioning. Visioning is so vital that it is practically the prerequisite Chapter One in any book on the subject of leadership. Leaders of all kinds must have a clear vision to succeed. They need to know where their organization is going and why, and they need to communicate that vision clearly at all levels inside the organization and out.

But on a more personal level, leaders must also have a vision *for themselves*. At the level of the leader, visioning becomes something different than that longstanding vision that has to stand the test of time. It becomes something more fluid, more intuitive, and more flexible. It is a vision that changes as they change, but with consistent themes over time. The goal is not for a leader to establish one clear and permanent vision but to learn the skill of getting clarity about their vision again and again. For example, take an operations executive in a global medical equipment firm who had gotten overwhelmed by the pace of change in his company, which was growing exponentially, and his personal life, in which he was supporting aging parents. He had begun to be plagued with the big existential questions, like, "What am I doing?" and "What's it all for?" By using visioning techniques as a way of finding clarity, he was able to discern what he wanted for himself as a leader, a son, an aspirational executive, and a person. As his circumstances continued to change, he learned to reconnect with clarity about his own personal vision--one that helped him to both be a better leader and lead a better life.

Rethink time and teams. The efficiencies of personal leadership come from a paradigm of abundance. Leaders need to recognize the wealth of resources available to them when they maximize their time and use the supportive people in their lives to help them achieve.

Work with a coach or mentor. Personal leadership is supported by a partner who can pose thoughtful questions, make observations, and help leaders learn to see new possibilities.

Look for ways to align and integrate one's life. We are who we are wherever we are. The closer leaders can tie their true selves to their leadership roles, and in turn their leadership roles and their lives, the happier and healthier they will be--on all fronts.

Is it easy? Not necessarily. Introspection can be hard work. Is it worth it? Ask yourself: What would change for leaders if they had an inner resource to help them maintain stability and security within themselves when the world outside seems so unsound?

Successful leaders know that answer. Here are a few words from leaders who value the personal side of leadership:

"Leadership is personal. Management is personal. There's something very powerful about bringing your whole self to work." -Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook

"If you can get your talents and passions to align with the organizational need, you're really in a position when you can maximize contribution to company and achieve your career best." - David Kilby, Director of Intel University, Intel

"As leaders it's time to dig deep personally. There are a lot of people out there that are frozen. It's a time to create a new future, and we can't do it if we can't think clearly." -Lisa Weber, President, Individual Business, MetLife

When you practice personal leadership, you can take the practices of leadership more generally and apply them to oneself. As a result, both you and your team will flourish, even in challenging times.

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