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the right speech to make
this year



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In 2008, Marc, the CEO of a 100-person software development company, decided not to have a company holiday party. What was there to celebrate? Companies around them had crashed and burned. Clients were skittish. Sales in the last two quarters had slipped. Better to put the money to more productive uses.

This year however, the Chairman of the board told Marc he shouldn't skip the party. It was, he insisted, a productive use of a few thousand dollars. For morale.

And Marc agreed. But then he was stumped. See, every year at the holiday party he would give an exciting, morale boosting visionary speech about the next year. How great he expected it to be. What he knew they would make happen together as a team.

The problem was that this year *that* speech would be dishonest. Because Marc really has no idea what next year will bring. None of us do. This year was tough. Marc's company did fine; better than their competition. But it wasn't easy. People are tired, having worked harder than ever without commensurate results. Next year looks like it will be better but by how much?

How could Marc tell them next year will be great? That wouldn't boost morale. It would simply erode trust.

So maybe it would be more appropriate not to give a speech at the party. Wouldn't it be better for Marc to say nothing than to say a bunch of things he doesn't even believe himself? Sure he could talk about what he wants next year to look like. But that has its downsides too. Employees would hear Marc talk about how great the future might be and they'd all think he's out of touch. Or worse, they'd be terrified he'll hold them accountable for achieving his pipe dreams. So maybe silence would be better after all.

Except that it's not.

Because we know that people hesitate to communicate bad messages. So if they don't communicate at all? Well, that just confirms our worst fears. Silence isn't the absence of communication. It's the nightmare of communication, fuelling our negative fantasies. Sometimes not saying anything is worse than saying the wrong thing.

Marc knew this so he spent a long time thinking about what to say and then, in a flash of insight, he realized why he was having such a hard time. He was preparing for the wrong speech.

Painting a picture of the present we know can be far more valuable and comforting than painting a picture of the future we don't. We don't always need the answers. Sometimes we just need to know that we're not alone and we're understood.

Here's a synopsis of what he ended up saying:

It's good to be together again. A year ago the world around us seemed to be falling apart. The economy seemed to be heading to a depression. Many companies failed or disappeared.

Everyone in this room worked tremendously hard. We're all tired. But we held it together and had a decent year. Revenue was up which, in a year when even flat would have been good, is remarkable. Still, you worked harder than ever without seeing proportional results. That's discouraging.

But that extra effort made a big difference. We did less work with some clients but replaced that with successes elsewhere. We won a number of awards. With a steady hand and big support from our investors we held it together and actually succeeded.

This year my very humble holiday message is of gratitude to all those people who made it happen. Thank you for working so hard without always seeing the fruits of your efforts. I see it though. And I appreciate it.

And thank you to all the wives, husbands, partners, girlfriends and boyfriends for your patience and support.

I raise my glass in a toast to all of you and those who can't join us. To a wonderful and safe holiday. Thank you for listening.

After the speech, more people came up to thank, appreciate, and congratulate him than after any speech he had given before.

Sometimes the smartest vision you can have is a clear one of the people in front of you.





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