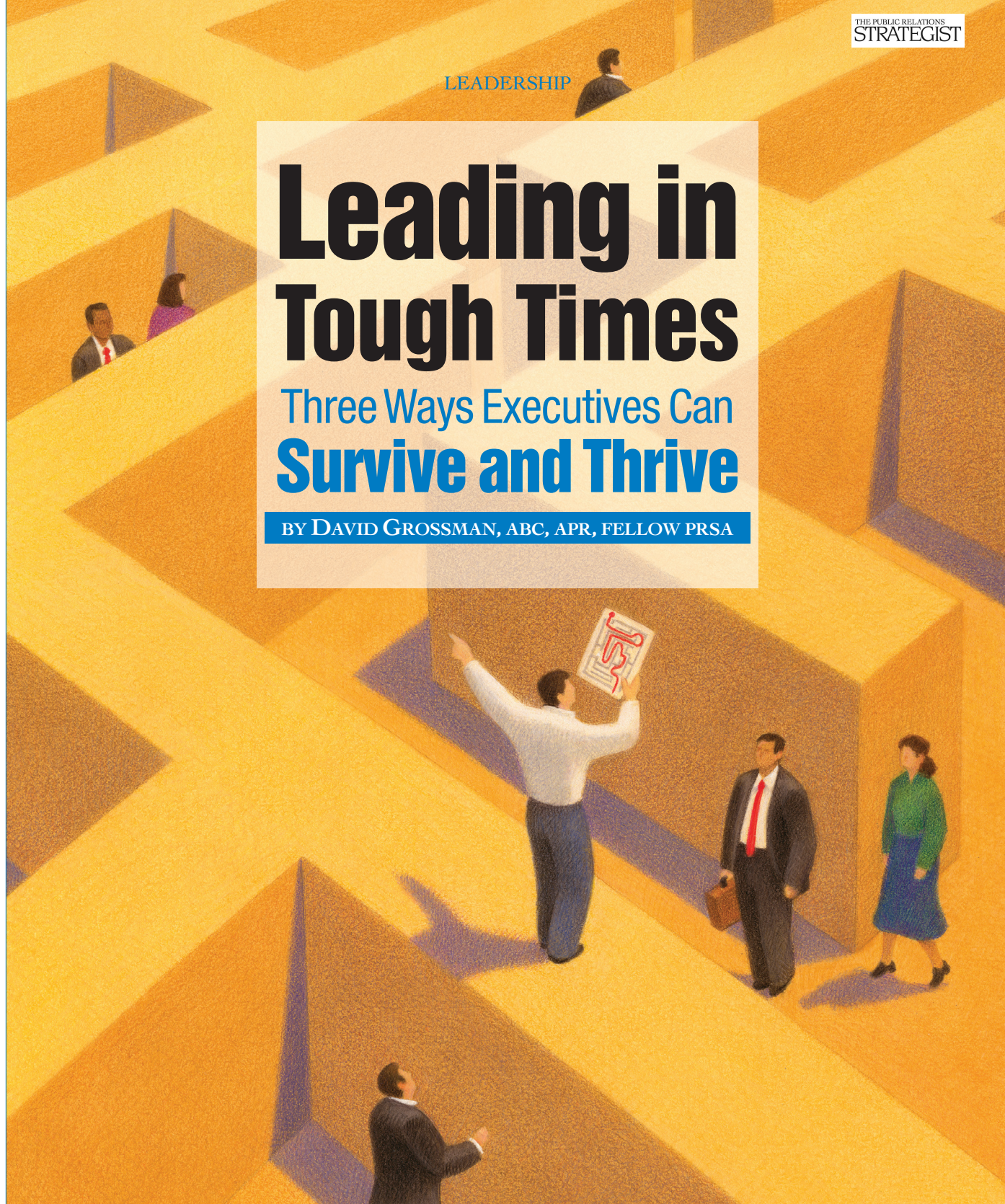


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Leading in Tough Times

Three Ways Executives Can Survive and Thrive

BY DAVID GROSSMAN, ABC, APR, FELLOW PRSA



In these challenging economic times, it is more crucial than ever to develop and nurture great leaders at all levels of an organization. Communicating courageously to drive engagement and business results in tough times is when leadership is tested.

Success is too important to be left solely to the executive

suite; everyone can and should lead from wherever he or she sits. Below are three ways any leader can survive and thrive.

Learning to meet challenges

A recent *Fortune* magazine article called “How to Build Great Leaders” concluded that developmental assignments

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are among the most important tools the world's "Top Companies for Leaders" use to build their executives.

The article argues that there's no better time than a recession to push leaders outside of their comfort zones with an investment in developmental assignments, where the payback isn't seen for a number of years.

These stretch assignments often put leaders in unfamiliar situations where they have no experience. They may need to learn about the banking industry in China, for example, or master logistics before running a plant in Mexico. The article sums up these development opportunities as a long-term initiative. "We can't afford not to do this," one executive said.

Many employees are learning how to thrive in challenging situations right now. Call on your leadership and leaders at all levels to do the same.

Debunking leadership myths

How can we get our leaders on board? Bust a few myths for them and help them build one of the most critical competencies they need to succeed:

Myth No. 1 — Leaders don't have time to communicate.

Reality — Leaders are communicating whether they think they are or not. Both their words and actions communicate constantly, so why not help them improve?

Myth No. 2 — Because you talk and write, it means you are communicating.

Reality — If your audience isn't understanding you, then it doesn't matter what you're saying. Communication happens in the mind of the listener. What's more, you can't lead if you can't express yourself in a way that others can relate to. If you are an individual contributor, then you rely on your technical skills — that's how you get things done. But leadership is about getting things done and moving a business forward through guiding others.

Myth No. 3 — People won't interpret situations or give meaning to them if you don't talk about them.

Reality — People read into your behavior when you withhold information or avoid communication. Not communicating causes employees to feel undervalued and underappreciated — and it creates questions and static. Communication provides the right information, prevents misinformation and drama, and can engender a sense of pride, commitment and trust that keeps employees giving their best effort.

Myth No. 4 — Employees don't want bad news.

Reality — Employees want to be treated like adults and

want to know what you know, when you know it. Employees might not like the news, but the goal should be to help them understand what's happening and how it impacts them. They'll judge leaders based on whether they've explained the reasons behind their decisions more than on the decisions themselves.

Many employees today are feeling wounded, whether they've personally been affected by the dramatic changes that are happening inside many organizations or not. According to consulting firm Watson Wyatt, engagement scores for all employees in the United States have declined by 9 percent since last year. Worse, engagement scores for top-performing companies have dropped by 23 percent during the same period, as companies have taken significant cost-cutting measures. An already confused and skeptical audience is even more so today.

At a time when organizations need even greater productivity from fewer employees, relying on myths rather than debunking them increases the likelihood that business will be slowed, interrupted or stopped altogether.

Understanding communication

When talking with employees about great leaders, you often hear that they "get it." Specifically, here's what leaders understand when it comes to communication literacy:

- **They know themselves** — Leaders should have a mirror on their desk as a constant reminder of the influence they can have. Effective leaders understand their leadership style (their strengths and weaknesses) and know how to use it. They know that communication and leadership begin and end with themselves. They know that their employees count on them and trust them to convey job-related information.

- **They focus on outcomes** — With fewer people and more-limited resources, organizations can't work in the same way. Leaders help a team prioritize its workload and encourage ongoing communications and actions to execute goals. At the same time, these leaders reward what they want to see more of — new behaviors, thoughtful choices — and show appreciation for successful outcomes.

- **They listen** — Good leaders ask questions, actively listen, allow employees to vent, empathize, reframe issues where needed and help employees create a sense of community.

- **They understand their audience** — Because they listen closely, leaders are able to identify with their employees and know where they're coming from. They empathize and adjust their leadership style to match the audience.

- **They know their role** — Put simply, good leaders

The Five Things Great CEOs Do

The most innovative CEOs spend more time practicing five specific skills than their less creative counterparts, according to a six-year study by several business scholars.

These five skills surfaced during interviews with leaders such as Amazon's Jeff Bezos, eBay's Pierre Omidyar and Dell's Michael Dell and are reported in a recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review*.

"Most executives view creativity and innovation as a 'black box,' or something other people are good at, but they don't know how to do it themselves," said Jeffrey H. Dyer, lead author of the study and a professor at Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management.

Dyer and his co-authors, Hal B. Gregersen of INSEAD and Clayton M. Christensen of Harvard Business School, asked innovators how they came up with their best insights.

Here are the five skills that emerged:

1. Questioning

"It became clear early on that these folks asked a lot more questions than your typical executive," Dyer said. "Especially questions that challenge the status quo."

To develop these skills, the researchers suggest writing 10 questions each day that challenge assumptions in your company or industry. Asking "Why?" "Why not?" and "What if?" spurs creative thinking.

2. Observing

Watch how customers experience a product or service in their natural environment. Focus on what's different from what you expected, the researchers said.

understand the critical role they play in translating complex information for their staff. They know that their job is about context and relevance. And they know employees want and need to understand the "why" behind decisions before they take any sort of action.

• **They understand the new normal** — Leaders help shape an accurate perspective for their employees. They discuss what's led to the new reality (pay cuts, job losses and so on), why it happened and provide a realistic yet optimistic picture of the future. Even if the future is unclear, they know there's value in discussing what we know today, what we

3. Experimenting

Seek training outside your expertise. Examine a product or process just to see how it works.

4. Networking

Instead of networking to gain access to resources or market yourself, connect with others simply to find and test new ideas. This will widen your perspective, the researchers said. For example, contact the five most creative people you know and ask them to share what they do to stimulate creative thinking.



5. Associating

Connecting seemingly unrelated questions and ideas is the skill that brings all of the others together. But associations are triggered by new knowledge that is acquired through questioning, observing, experimenting and networking.

The researchers noted that the senior executives of the most innovative companies in their study don't delegate creative work. So how do they make time for these innovation skills? They enlist others' help in planning and analysis, the skills that are important for execution rather than innovation, the researchers said. ■

don't know, what we're learning and misconceptions we can bust. Their transparency leads to an increase in trust and a feeling of solidarity. No us versus them.

• **They understand how the intangibles matter (and even some tangibles, too)** — There has been a resurgence in the importance of tangible rewards in the past year, such as pay and benefits. As the economy strengthens, however, we're going to see the focus come back to employees' intangible needs — to have a boss who cares about them and demonstrates it regularly, and to be connected to something larger than themselves. Historically, the importance of tangible

Brief

Management Lessons From NBC's Leno-O'Brien Imbroglio

Senior management and boards of directors can draw useful lessons from the recent "Tonight Show" fracas, said Adam Galinsky, professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. As *BusinessWeek* reported on Jan. 27, NBC's late-night crisis illustrates that a good succession plan should involve more than just picking a successor.

In a sense, Jay Leno was an outgoing CEO, and NBC's decision to keep him around bred backbiting, sniping and hierarchal dysfunction, Galinsky said in a Q-and-A with the magazine. The company's board of directors has to make sure the other person leaves. "Make it clear that you tried something and you know your experiment didn't work, and you are moving forward with a new plan," Galinsky said. "And do it quickly."

Regarding the performance of the new CEO — who in this case was Conan O'Brien — the board must decide in advance how much time it will give the new person to establish the culture and to put the people in place that he or she will need to be successful. But amid the uncontrollable variables of the fast-moving business world, perfect measurements can



never be made, Galinsky said.

How does the new person smooth things over? Galinsky recommended redirection, reciprocity and rationality. Redirect people's anger toward the appropriate source; create reciprocal goodwill by offering them something they want; and instill rationality by letting them know that "if they screw around with you, you will come after them with all the weapons at your disposal." ■ — Greg Beaubien

rewards diminishes over time as the importance of intangibles increases. You might join an organization because of pay or benefits, but how long you stay and how productive you are is dependent on your boss.

• **They realize the employee deal has changed** — In many organizations, the deal has changed, and employees have no say in the matter. This has led to the perception of broken promises, unfair treatment and apathy. Good leaders understand that unless you show empathy for the current climate for employees, when times get better (which they will), you'll face challenges recruiting and retaining top talent.

• **They're short on hype and hyperbole and long on consistent and constant communication** — *Honesty* is the watchword. Their communication is regular and constant, including a lot of listening and pulse checks. They repeat and repeat and repeat. They know that communication isn't about "spin," it's about honesty.

• **They plan their communication** — As with every other strategic discipline inside organizations today, there's a plan in place. The communication strategy is not left to chance, and the leader doesn't wing it.

• **They take care of their best people** — They are

focused on helping their highest performers grow. Your stars can be the first to leave when the market opens up because they're the ones who will have options. Leaders give them a reason to stay.

For those of us in communications who support leaders, much of this might not seem like a stretch, but for most leaders, it is. Especially in times of turmoil, we need to think about how we might help them turn a wounded and skeptical work force into one that's engaged and advocates on behalf of our organizations. These leadership development tips guarantee both short-term returns and long-term gains to help leaders become leader-communicators. ■



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