



8 MYTHS THAT CAN RUIN YOUR BUSINESS

...leading in tough times

BY GREGG THOMPSON

The Internet is littered with articles by well-meaning consultants exhorting leaders to intensify their communication, refocus on the customer, become authentic and retrench into their core businesses in tough times. Sadly, many of these pieces have found their way into popular leadership development programs much to the detriment of our organizations. Here are the 8 myths that have become pervasive and, if adopted in your organization, will undermine your leadership in good times and bad.

Myth #1: Communicate, communicate, communicate. I think I will gag the next time I hear someone drone on about the need to communicate profusely during difficult times. People do not need more information during these times. Organizations are overflowing with information. What they need is meaning and purpose. What is the organization's story? Who are we? Why do we exist? Where are we going? Humans make sense of the world through stories. The leader's job—tell the big story, the story that inspires, guides and sustains.

Myth #2: Put people first. I can't help it, but whenever I hear this, I get this vision of a rowboat filled with happy people sipping champagne as they go over Niagara Falls. The enterprise must come first. It is more important than any one person. The enterprise pays for our mortgages, our groceries and our children's college. The enterprise must survive and thrive. Treat people with dignity and respect, but remember that you serve them best by creating a profitable enterprise that provides cool, well-paid work.

Myth #3: Focus on top performers and get rid of your B's. First, shame on you for having B performers. In tough times, it's easy to blame them, but the hard truth is that they are likely a direct reflection of your leadership. Here is the secret: you're A's are likely going to step up and carry a heavier load anyway. The real potential lies with your B's. It's simple (but humbling). Go to each B and tell them that their work is critical to the organization and that you, personally, are asking for their very best game. Have you ever extended such an invitation to them? Probably not or you wouldn't have B's.

Myth #4: Act with authenticity and integrity. Oops, too late. There is an old adage that says: "Adversity reveals character." Not true for the leader. Your character (your personal brand) was created long before the bad times arrived. And it's all about the decisions that you have made. It's about self-interest. Do you have a reputation for making decisions that are in the best interests of the organization and its members or in your best interest? People watch and they know. It is too late to earn trust when the ship is being tossed up onto the rocks.

Myth #5: Dive in and get your hands dirty. To paraphrase the pioneering management thinker, Peter Drucker, much of what we call management means getting in the way of others. If you can't write better code, pound rivets faster or cook a tastier omelette, leave your people alone. If you can, again, shame on you. Your job is to create an organization brimming with people who can create value, sell it, and deliver it to the customer...better than you! How can you actually be helpful? Turn every conversation into a coaching conversation. Encourage. Challenge. Acknowledge. Confront. Affirm. Inspire. That's your job. Do it.

Myth #6: Be completely transparent. During tough times, it is not uncommon to see senior leaders wringing their hands and fussing at length about how much information they should share with their organizations. The guilt associated with possessing negative information is quite uncomfortable. Get over it. You do not have a contract with the members of your organization to share every piece of information with them. It would be irresponsible to do so. Difficult, agonizing decisions are often best made behind closed doors. The optimal strategy...share the following communication framework and stick to it (in clear conscience):

- a. Here is our intention....
- b. Here is what we know (and how we believe it will impact you)....
- c. Here is what we do not know....
- d. Here is what we will keep private....

Myth #7: Be positive and upbeat. Of course a leader's optimism and confidence is infectious; no argument there. However, we insult the members of our organization when we minimize the perils and landmines that lie ahead. People are not stupid; they know when there are tough times coming. Pollyanna-like cheerleading won't cut it. Leaders need to talk about the painful adversity to be faced, the critical battles to be won and the grand adventure on the horizon.

Myth #8: This too will pass. "Please God, give us another oil boom. We promise not to blow it all away this time." This humorous but telling satirical bumper sticker seen today in many oil towns across North America unfortunately sums up many leaders' approaches to managing through difficult circumstances. Organizations are fond of using words like agility, adaptability and resilience to describe the qualities they value in their leaders; however, what most managers hear is "Hunker down. Lay off people. Cut costs. This too will pass." The prevailing strategy appears to be: get through the difficult patches so we can survive long enough for circumstances to save us (read: the market, our customers, the government or the lottery will come to our rescue.) Here is the problem with this. Good winds will blow. Bad winds will blow. This is the nature of the world we live in. We need leaders who can excel in both.

There is another way. We can and should develop leaders who don't just survive in tough times, they thrive. These are leaders who revel in uncertainty and see opportunity where others see misfortune. In short, these are leaders who are at their best in tough times...and bring out the best in others.



Gregg Thompson is President of Bluepoint Leadership Development and author of several books, including "Unleashed: Leader as Coach". He welcomes your comments by e-mail.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

CALL: (513) 683.4702

TOLL-FREE: 1.888.221.8685

GREGG'S PHONE: (513) 289.0141

E-MAIL: greggthompson@bluepointleadership.com

Please feel free to pass this article along to others who share your interest in Leadership Development.