

# **LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: Six KEY STRATEGIES**

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

**B**y all standards, our current economic situation is the greatest challenge we have faced in generations. The only thing we know for certain is that no one knows for certain what we are up against. For those who have never been through this kind of economic test, there is a great opportunity to develop new resources, new strategies, and a renewed sense of self-trust. For those of us who learned from our parents about the Great Depression and have lived through some tough times of our own, there is an opportunity to offer some perspective and wisdom. I want to offer mine...

From my experience of building strong organizational cultures over the past three decades, I have found the following six strategies helpful for leading in uncertain times.

- 1. Stop and get your bearings.** If you have ever been lost in the wilderness you know the natural tendency to speed up when you are afraid. To alleviate the inclination toward panic, it's vital to slow down and get grounded. Stop and get your bearings. It is essential now to take time to reflect on your values and priorities, and to focus on the things you can control and clarify what to let go of. This is a time for examining your source of strength and security. As you gain renewed strength from within, you will get the clarity to change the changeable, and accept that which is out of your control. If you can learn to do this, you will have more focused action, will have a more sustainable sense of self-worth, and will sleep better at night.
- 2. Bring added value to others.** "Giving our fans value for money is the best antidote to a slumping economy," said Calgary Flames President and CEO, Ken King in a recent interview. Use this time to invest in your people, all of your stakeholders, including your family and personal relationships.

Build strong relationships now because when the crisis is over you will need these people to build for the future. Real wealth lies in the strength of the people in your life and the level of trust you have with these people. Focus on the areas where you can bring value to those who report to you and to whom you serve. I remember the principle I learned from my father years ago: always do more than what you get paid for.

- 3. Keep a servant attitude.** Even though down-turns in the economy and in life require increased reflection and contemplation, it is not a time to withdraw. Wealthy executives who jump out of buildings when the stock markets crash are people whose lives are out of balance, whose self-worth has been determined by their net worth. A society that only values what makes money and has a high return on financial investment is a society without stability. Generativity — the capacity and commitment to give to others — is vital to a sustainable life and a sustainable society. As a leader in an Ontario electrical company recently told me: It's better, as a leader, to be a *river* than a *reservoir*. Rivers balance giving and taking; Reservoirs are takers, and unless there is an outflow, they will eventually stagnate and die.
- 4. Focus on what's most important.** Uncertain times provide excellent opportunities to be more reflective and to reaffirm what has true meaning and significance in life. As stress levels that come with uncertainty increase, it is easy to neglect what matters most, such as personal relationships, learning, family and health. Resist the temptation to abandon these things by making time for them on a daily basis. Be sure to take time to exercise, to learn, to get some added rest, to think, to simply be still, to re-examine and reconnect

with your professional network or your loved ones, and to be of service to your community. Even though the inclination is to withdraw and convince yourself you don't have the time or the resources for them, these are what give you energy and new perceptions for facing the future with renewed creativity and energy.

5. **Work with confidants and mentors.**

Confidants and mentors are people you can open up with and be real. They support you to find your own truth and to discover your security from within. Getting through the inevitable tough times of life is a lonely journey, but it can't be done alone. We need perspective, renewed vision to pass on to others, conversation, and support. Confidants and mentors are people you can pour your heart out to, who will remind you why it's worth doing what you're doing, and are not afraid to tell you the truth. They lift you and inspire you to be more of who you are. They value you when you don't value yourself. Confidants and mentors are very precious. Living without mentors and confidants is like trying to survive a Canadian winter without a coat. While giving you support, confidants and mentors give perspective, reminding you that, "I used to complain about having no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet." They help you remember that every night is followed by a day, that the economy, like life itself, is cyclical, and that every situation, good or bad, is always temporary.

6. **Keep your character intact.**

Circumstances do not *determine* a person; they *reveal* him. It's not the fierceness of the storm that determines whether we break, but rather the strength of the roots that lie below the surface. The most valuable life is one of honesty, unselfishness, and compassion. Passing the mirror test at the end of the day (being able to look at yourself in the mirror and have self-respect) is what will ultimately sustain you through tough times. It is,

perhaps, the most important test of greatness. My grandfather raised eight kids during the Depression and taught me that *character is independent of economics*. When your wealth is lost, something is lost; when your health is lost, a great deal is lost; when your character is lost, everything is lost.

When the times get tough, it is easy to succumb to pessimism as the media takes advantage of the doom and gloom to get our attention. But positive and affirming action is much more sustaining. Barack Obama understands how responding to the current crisis with renewed vision, conviction and courage will be good for the spirit as well as good for the organizations and communities that we serve. In his inaugural speech he said, "What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that *there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.*"

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