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CONFRONTING CHALLENGES HEAD ON

THERE is a saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough gets going" In challenging times leaders need to bite the bullet and confront the real issues instead of being wishy-washy with lots of double talk. Here are some key actions leaders can take.

By Dr Victor S.L. Tan

Maintain Competitiveness Without Reducing Price

In a downturn where sales are decreasing, it is all too easy to succumb to reducing prices of products and services. It is better to find out what is truly ailing customers and provide them with what they value most. Often on closer scrutiny, non-price factors such as convenience, superb service, suitability of products and speedy response to customer complaints are more important. Reducing price obviates the need to improve. People will no longer explore new ways to differentiate their products or services. It is such complacency that will eventually lead to a company's downfall.

Engage Staff In Resolving Real Issues

The role of the leader is not to provide all the solutions to their staff. Enough damage has been done in school where teachers think for their students and spoon feed them. The more leaders get their people to think for themselves and come up with their right solutions, the more effective their leadership is. This makes perfect sense as it is not possible for a leader to be aware of all the actual happenings in the workplace. By engaging employees to address the real issues, they will also develop more commitment and a sense of belonging which by themselves provide that intrinsic motivation for them to perform better.

Set High Standards

Nothing breeds complacency faster than low goals and expectations. All too often leaders like to rationalize that the company is not doing too badly compared to others. Others rationalise that they have done relatively well considering



how far they have come. They will argue that given the tough challenges in the industry and the economy, the company is doing pretty well.

Michelangelo, the multi-talented Italian painter, architect, sculptor and poet said it best: "The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark". For that will certainly drive us to become totally complacent.

Monitor Progress Regularly

One supervisor learnt it the hard way. To build a "more trusting environment", he decided to get rid of the weekly output progress meetings and allow each individual to monitor his own progress. After two months, production output fell by 20%. Monitoring progress is not about not trusting others. In fact, it has a positive psychology effect on people if it is done the right way.

According to Peter Drucker, the father of management, "What gets

measured, gets done". To prevent complacency in the workplace, it would be useful for leaders to remember the adage, "People do not do what the manager expects and they do what the manager inspects"

Hold People Accountable For Results

There is magic in holding people accountable for results. It conveys two very important messages. One, the belief in the person's ability. Two, the importance of the responsibility the person play. To be effective, this must be communicated in a positive and confident manner. It is not about telling people to do whatever they can and "to try your best". It is about communicating to people that their result is an important part to complete a puzzle. The success of the company depends on each one delivering the results that they are accountable for. In essence when it comes to the company's success everyone is a V.I.P. (Very Important Participant).

Discipline And Penalise Non-Performers

As a consultant, having worked with many companies, I noticed that most Asian managers are poor disciplinarians. They are better at playing the good guys and delivering the great news. Discipline does not mean shouting and threatening people, although some managers seem to falsely believe that is the case. I once asked a manager why he screamed at one of his staff. His rationale at justifying his behaviour was most telling, "Well, some people have to be shouted at, otherwise they just don't move". There is a better way. One simply has to be firm and fair in disciplining and penalising non-performers. Being firm means one is unwavering and will not give in to sob stories. Fair in the sense that they were provided the training, resources, and ample notice about their poor performance before action is taken on them.

Reward And Recognise Based On Performance

Human beings are just too predictable. They have needs to be met. Not just basic needs. They have other needs to be nourished emotionally, psychologically and intellectually. People want to feel important. They want to be recognised for what they have done. They want to belong. They are driven by ego and a need to achieve. Ultimately they want a sense of fairness in terms of recognition and reward for the effort have put in. If humans are so predictable, how is it that leaders find it so hard to motivate people to perform. Motivation in many organisation has been undermined by company politics, human flaws of favouritism, conflicts of interest, self-driven agenda and other motivation-dampening behaviours. To motivate people to perform, leaders simply have to reward and recognise people based on performance.

In essence, in challenging times, leaders need to seize the bull by its horns and make some unpopular decision to enable their companies to survive.



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