

**Effective Leadership in Times of Change**  
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While reports seem to indicate that the world-wide recession may be ending, we are all still facing its effects a weak economy, lagging market sectors, high unemployment, and little confidence in the future, our institutions and our ability to monitor and manage ourselves, or oversee our systems. Our belief in long-trusted traditions has waned.

Many people promote change but are really talking about rearranging the deck chairs on the ship - not altering its direction. So I offered the following question for your consideration, "Change in service of what?" I suggested change in service of a compelling future. Why is this relationship so fundamental to performance? Because what people do and don't do every day is what achieves results, or doesn't. What people do and don't do every day is generated from somewhere - it is not just arbitrary or capricious. It is a function of the "future" they are living into. What that means is that while we may not have thought about it or even articulated it, there is always a particular way the future looks to us, a future that we can see in front of us and into which we are living. That future shapes our actions.

I know that idea may seem contrary to common sense as most people believe the way we act is more often than not shaped by our past experiences. Why we often think from that perspective is that most people's future is constituted by expectations, fears, hopes, decisions from the past - ultimately based in experiences from the past. We unwittingly project those decisions into our future, limiting possibilities right off the bat. These decisions that impact our future could be decisions about who we are and others are, what you and others can do, what you and others cannot do, or what you, others and even your family, community and organizations can achieve. We call this unwitting future a "default future." It is also what you and I call "business as usual" or no change in direction. A default future actually generates people's levels of performance and collectively an organization's level of performance. That is the bad news.

But there is good news - we have a choice about that future - meaning we don't have to be stuck with a past-based future. We can create a new one that is completely disconnected from the past, and full of possibility. A leader's job is to be responsible for creating, generating and giving life

to a created future - a future that is extraordinary - for their organization. It is a compelling, exciting future that alters direction. It engenders organizational engagement, a sense of urgency to fulfill it, and committed action to make it a reality.

A created future exists in our speaking and how we listen. It paints a picture of something compelling, something powerful, something of which people want to be part. We have seen time and again the power a new future has on people in an organization; we've seen businesses turn around failure, launch new revenue streams, experience dramatic growth and sail past competitors. Our speaking as leaders must be about giving life to a possibility - one which people connect to emotionally. At this point in our time, having an extraordinary future in front of us will energize us and empower our actions in new ways.

In a multi-million dollar capital project the purpose of which was a new bio-degradable fuel, the absence of a created future was very evident. The project was riddled with problems, difficulties, setbacks and challenges too numerous to be addressed effectively by the thousand-person site staff. Even though the project was the first of its kind in the western hemisphere and would provide an environmentally clean fuel source to that part of the world, the problems were overwhelming. The work environment was characterized by an absence of leadership, undermining between contracting companies, finger pointing, and an absence of real communication. This environment shaped the performance and results in the project. The project was two years behind and many millions of dollars over budget.

When the project was so far in jeopardy that it might be shut down, the leadership took bold action. Once they understood that leadership and the staff were acting consistent with "failing," they saw that their behavior and actions were completely representative of that view. The leadership took on the challenge of turning the tide. By recognizing the absence of a created future, they generated one for themselves and the staff. Standing inside that new future, they were able to alter what people saw to be possible and what they could commit to produce. The project is now on a new path.

This year, many organizations have gone through times as challenging as any that any one of us can remember. In facing that reality, we as leaders naturally take our attention off the long term

and deal primarily with the immediate. Attention to the near term becomes imperative, however at some point - and it will be different with every organization - leaders will need to have their eye on what's next and how to galvanize their people in the right direction no matter what the circumstances.

Effective leaders generate and maintain the conversation for the future of their organization over time. In lieu of a deliberately created future, the default future will continue to reign, limiting possibility and therefore performance.

I offer a few questions to think about that you may find useful:

**What future is your organization living into? Is it given by the past or is it a creation?**