



Focus

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Five Leadership Tips for 2010

The beginning of a new year is a good time for a leader to take stock and reassess his or her beliefs, attitudes, and current plans. Objectively examining your beliefs is particularly important because rapid change often renders the conventional wisdom, which has served us well in the past, inappropriate for the present. We all live in the past to some extent, but leaders cannot afford to make decisions within an out-of-date framework of beliefs and attitudes.

W. Edwards Deming, father of the modern quality movement that first took hold in Japan in the 1950s put the necessity for change this way: "It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory."

I offer below my five top tips for dealing with business challenges in 2010. These tips are fundamental behaviors that will serve a leader anytime, but I have chosen these because they are particularly relevant to our present-day business environment.

Pick one activity to do more of. This tip is all about focusing on important matters. Remember the 80/20 rule (a/k/a the Pareto principle) which states that the 20% fraction generates 80% of the outcomes. Play to your personal strengths, what's needed now, and what works best in your current situation. Along with the more of, chose activities to do *less* of. Discontinue or deemphasize enough other tasks to allow yourself to be fully engaged in mission critical activates. For extra credit, work with your people to identify "stop doing" lists; the results are often amazing.

Walk through your facilities with a customer perspective filter. Critically examine activities as you move about your offices, jobsites, and other facilities, and ask, "How would a customer perceive this behavior?" For an even more effective exercise, ask your top three managers to carry out these observations, each from a different perspective, namely: That of a new customer, a strong competitor, and someone who mistrusts your company. Then meet to discuss the results and set change priorities for the most promising areas.

Use stories to describe a vision, share information, or celebrate success. The best leaders have mastered the art of leadership storytelling (*The Leader's Guide to Storytelling* by Stephen Denning is an excellent reference), and know that good stories are experience by proxy. Remember the saying, "Tell me a fact and I'll remember. Tell me the truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story, and I'll hold it in my heart forever." When change is desired, using a springboard story is a particularly effective way to help people individually envision the new future in a way that excites and inspires.

State ALL things in the positive. We all too often say what we don't want, rather than what we do. For example, "Don't begin a sentence with a contraction" or "I don't want *that* to happen to me!" Instead, state

what you do want, and use clear language with powerful words, like always and everyone and without exception.

Answer the why question to increase engagement and compliance. Unless the reason is blindingly obvious, explaining “the why” behind “the what and when” increases the odds that your followers will do what you want. Telling people why helps them understand the larger picture, increases buy-in, and also gives followers a framework in which they can make better independent decisions.

This short list does not, of course, encompass all the leadership behaviors in the toolkit of an effective leader. For example, fundamental leadership behaviors include saying thank you for good work and celebrating victories. However, adding these five tools will increase your effectiveness at a time when “opportunities” are many and competitive pressures are intense.

Finally, change the word “species” to “businesses” and Charles Darwin offers timely advice for 2010: “It’s not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”

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