

GOOD OFFENCE

**To beat the recession, companies must rise
above the media spin, confront their fears
and inspire staff to come out fighting**

Whatever your reaction to this recession, it should not be rooted in fear. Without falling back on clichés about what happens when the going gets tough, we should note how many of the world's top tycoons made their first million, by demonstrating imagination and nerve when everyone else was running scared.

Success is dependent on your attitude, mindset and the strategies that you formulate and implement. There is no better time to apply a fresh perspective and generate creative solutions than in a challenging one. So, if you are considering taking that big leap into the unknown, take it now, perhaps using ideas from people outside the business who are not emotionally involved.

Fear of change

Change is the lifeblood of business and it must be embraced wholeheartedly. Old practices may have to be thrown overboard; some valued but long-serving staff may face redundancy. We have to learn how to manage change and turn it into a positive experience. Rather than fear it, we need to welcome it.

The media proclaim negativity about the credit crunch, but pessimism is contagious and business leaders need to learn to rise above the media spin. Think what you did the last time your business wasn't growing. What worked then and what might work now?

Those with a negative mindset will identify even minor setbacks as major obstacles and can blow them out of proportion.

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In order to succeed in business you have to stand tall. Real business leaders develop a "never quit" philosophy and turn apparent obstacles into challenges. If your competitor fails and closes down, that means greater opportunity in the marketplace for you - not less. Their customers will become your customers when they perceive your strength and tenacity. Strong companies tend to place orders with strong suppliers they believe will still be there in five years.

Deceptive comfort zone

Coming out of your comfort zone is not always easy. Think about the options that will bring about results.

Nothing is more important than preparing for the economic upturn and positioning yourself and your business to take full advantage of

the opportunities that will exist next month or next year. So here are some strategies to help you gain that competitive advantage.

Review, re-direct or re-brand

This crisis could be the end of one chapter in your corporate evolution and the start of another. Take an in-depth, critical look at your product and how it sits in the market. Decide whether to continue in the same direction, or if it is time for a new track.

Action: Commission a SWOT analysis to view the strengths and weaknesses of your business in perspective. Evaluate the opportunities and threats, and question whether or not your product will survive the next decade. Instead of waiting for good times to return, you may be part of the initiative that brings them back. Involve the people in your business, use the wealth of existing talent and creativity in your organisation. Ask for ideas and offer feasible initiatives. Make everyone in the business feel part of the solution.

Change management

The management of change is much more than an abstract talking point; it's a management skill that executives need to acquire and exert. And there's no time like a recession to see it put it into practice. You may have to let go of the past to make space for new creativity and growth.

Action: Some people view organisational change as an opportunity; others see it as a threat. Implement structured change management programmes for your management team so that they in turn can motivate their teams. You'll probably be working with a leaner machine so you'll need to ask more of your employees and their differing reactions need to be carefully managed. Letting go of projects you thought were going to work, but didn't, is critical to success. Don't be tempted to cling to old ways and old products just because they worked in the past.


Watch the competition

Everything is relative. See what your rivals are doing, but ensure you rise above them and then, at the critical moment, be ready to overtake them. Are they going from local to global? Should you make that move too or should it be the other way around?

Action: Track the competition and see what services they are offering. Listen to the words they are using and the new angles they are taking. Are they diversifying or going back to core activities? Is there anything that they are doing that could be of interest to you and that gives you creative input?

Mastermind groups

These are clubs of like-minded people committed to each other's growth and the unleashing of potential. Mix exclusively with those who can raise your game. Work at maintaining a positive mindset with success-orientated types with a passionate commitment to moving forward.

Action: If you can't find the right group, start 

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→ your own. Choose the people you want to mix with and those with opinions you value, not necessarily in the same industry - sometimes the outside view can shed new light on old problems. The right group will keep you on track, ensuring that you deliver on targets.

Manage stress

Employee stress-levels are going to be higher - just when training budgets are being cut and stress management appears a low priority. Corporations must face their responsibility to support employees in handling both their workplace and domestic pressures.

Action: Prompt support from your HR department or an external service could provide the right intervention in the form of counselling or training. Talking openly about stress issues and taking them seriously will help staff perform more effectively. Don't let them think that stress is a sign of weakness, not for discussion. The sooner that stress is identified and managed, the sooner people will get back to working effectively.

Build a 'we' community

Employees need to feel that they are an integral part of the business and not just an add-on, especially during periods of change. Explain that you depend on their going that extra mile, maybe without immediate reward. Then give them a share in the glory, when their efforts have borne fruit.

Action: Introduce in-house activities like sports and music clubs that will not necessarily increase overheads, but will encourage bonding. Create communal, café-style meals and let employees take turns at choosing the menu. Share your own concerns with staff during the crisis, ask for their suggestions, maybe launch an employee of the month award for the best idea for beating the recession. Always show your appreciation for exceptional contributions.

Keep in touch

In order to ensure that people feel involved and part of the business, communicate, communicate, communicate! With so many people working in isolation and often remotely, it may be difficult for people to keep in touch with each other.

Action: An e-newsletter to all employees, customers and clients will ensure that no one feels too isolated. The aim should be to ensure that news throughout the business is brought to everyone's computer. With so many managers travelling and operating out of regional offices the tendency is for them not to see their teams as much as they would like. An e-newsletter presents an ideal way for them to keep in touch.

Walk the talk

It is easy to assume that managers do this automatically but, unfortunately, they don't - often because they don't know how to communicate. There is a common misconception

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that just because managers are managers, they can manage people. This is not always the case. They may be very good at IT or PR, but not good at people management.

Action: Introduce active listening skills training to give them the tools to do their job more effectively. Now, more than ever, communications need to be open, honest and unambiguous. Active listening is an art and needs to be practised.

Value and recognise employees

Employees may be feeling insecure during these uncertain times and so it is important to acknowledge the efforts of your team and tell them how much you value their contribution. Ensure that employees feel part of the solution in going forward. You may not be able to increase wages, but saying thank you can result in increased loyalty and commitment.

Action: Talk openly to your team and share concerns. Ask for their input and allow them to share their fears with you. Set up a team survey or audit to ask for opinions and ideas on how working practices can be improved. Award an incentive for the person with the best idea. Introduce regular one-to-one appraisal meetings with individual team members and adopt an open door policy to facilitate good two-way communication.

Employee incentives

When you ask managers to do extra work outside of their normal remit, it can have a knock-on effect for their families. As an indication of appreciation, give them vouchers so that they can take their family out for dinner. This way the whole family will feel included in the process.

Action: Each manager should have a budget and 'appreciation' tokens to be given to employees as and when appropriate and redeemed at a local restaurant, for example.

Corporate Social Responsibility

It is easy to get caught up with one's own life and personal challenges, but now could be the right time to help people who are worse off than we are, while also helping the community at large.

Action: Arrange a sponsored walk for charity, or stage an imaginative piece of charitable theatre, which will not only make money, but also bring employees together outside the workplace.

These sentiments have earned agreement at international conferences. Clearly there is a huge latent appetite for bold creativity in the workplace.

However, progress is often held in check by fear. If you can summon courage and keep your nerve, your team will not only survive the storm, but be fully prepared for the next stage, when the sun comes out again.

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