

Providing Leadership in Challenging Times



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Every chief executive officer has one primary responsibility: to protect and grow the assets of the business that he or she leads.

Different markets and business cycles require CEOs to focus on different aspects of this responsibility, of course. Right now, throughout the global marketplace, there are many chief executives who have no choice but to operate in what I would call “protection mode.” Their goal is, quite simply, to maintain the company’s core strengths and values so that its franchise won’t go away during these tough times.

When the economic skies clear, as they always do, it will be the chief executive’s responsibility to lead these companies back into growth mode. But the ability to move between these different leadership phases and strategies takes vision, courage, management expertise, and a great deal of flexibility.

As someone who has led executive recruitment firms for about two decades, I’ve been through a number of downturns. They’ve taught me the essential importance of good communication. That starts at the top. You’ve got to walk a fine line of being candid with your workforce without demoralizing people. You need to figure out how to motivate them at a time when it’s normal to feel anxiety. After all, newspapers and TV shows will be full of bad news; employees will know what’s going on throughout the industry; and they’re probably also hearing concerns raised by family members.

But experienced CEOs realize that anxiety in a workforce can be incredibly disruptive. It can cause people to lose focus and drift because they’re so worried about what’s going to happen next. You’ve got to prevent that.

During the current economic downturn, I have adopted a communication strategy that responds to developments inside and outside CTPartners. I tried to set the stage fairly early on by telling people that the firm was going to be fine, but that 2008

This kind of messaging must be repetitive if it’s going to keep people focused, motivated, and mission-critical, while remaining realistic. I have talked about these issues month after month. And I have kept myself visible. The worst thing a CEO can do is to hunker down in the corner office. Leadership cannot go silent. If that happens, your best people are going to start thinking about bailing out.

Of course, in good times and bad, leaders must keep pushing



wouldn’t be the kind of year that we had anticipated. Leadership was concerned because of conditions beyond our control, but we were responding.

Then, as global economic conditions worsened, I focused more and more on that response. It was a time for belt-tightening, but we were going to be OK. Despite the cutbacks, I stressed, we also would take advantage of the best opportunities that the unsettled marketplace presented.

themselves in new directions. That’s the best part of the job. Recently, I relocated my family to London to be even more involved with CTPartners’ European and Asian operations, which are strong and have tremendous growth potential.

Being a successful CEO requires endless energy and an accessible core of optimism. That’s what keeps you—and your company—moving in the right direction, no matter what’s going on in the world around you. ■