

Leading When It Counts Revisited Actions To Take Now

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"In the days and weeks ahead, Americans will need leaders," Marshall Loeb wrote in CBS MarketWatch on September 14, 2001. Guidance was needed then from top executives, division heads, and anyone with a few people reporting to him or her. The current economic situation is even more difficult for many people to handle—due to the volatility and complexity of the economy. The current upswing may or may not last, but there are lasting changes in people's views, corporate governance and market conditions. Companies and people should take stock of what **immediate and longer term actions** are needed to meet new demands. Email or call for advice/references/sources to help with individual concerns or your company issues.

In the meantime, here are **7 actions you can take** right now.

1. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Talk to people-- let them know what's happening. Keep in touch, even if you're in lengthy meetings or traveling. Take a few minutes to check-in with people. Let them know that you care-if only by a quick email. After a long, difficult meeting—a quick "good show" or "nice catch" helps. Don't let emails go unacknowledged. Nothing increases anxiety faster than lack of communication.

And while you're communicating, **remember the impact of language**—don't use words like "out-of-control" and "crazed." The term "bail-out" wasn't best word choice. Anxious people react more strongly to wording than usual. Similarly, leaders can motivate with a phrase such as "keep the faith." Or "yard by yard it's hard, inch by inch it's a cinch." A client wrote an article years ago that this is the "decade of substance—if you have it, you'll be fine."

2. **Do what you say you will do**—and ensure everyone else does too. Even a minor inaction can damage (or create) trust. E.g. an executive's failure to show for a meeting and cancelling without explanation caused rumors and aggravated a bank's problems.

The group head in another bank hand-wrote brief notes to everyone after a particularly long, difficult day. His effort was appreciated – and everyone seemed to work longer, harder, with better spirits the next day.

Consistency and predictability are important for leaders—even more when the world seems unpredictable. After 9/11, I said to turn off the television, step away from the computer, get out of a meeting and if only for a few minutes take a break and gain perspective. These days a break is even more critical. Call and listen to your child laugh—or whatever is your version of smell the roses. One client made a video of his lab playing with a Frisbee which he watches when stress is high. If you're typically less flexible or flare in the afternoons, plan time for re-grouping. Maybe 15–30 minutes at 2 or 3. It works.

3. **Remember that style counts.** Management at all levels should project **calm, confidence.** "I'm like the swan—calm on the outside, but paddling like mad underneath," one CEO states. Show that you're human too. Cold efficiency will have short-term gains, but long-term negatives. Compassion and courtesy will be remembered for a long time. Be honest and direct, but don't scare people by describing a potential, but unlikely calamity.

Strive to get enough rest and take extra care to look good. In hectic times, people get impressions just passing you in the hall. Are you up for the job? Are things ok? There's some great scenes in "Barbarians at the Gate" depicting different Wall Street protagonists. If you've seen the movie, you know what I mean. If not, get it—definitely enjoyable.

4. **Learn a few stress basics.** People won't be operating at peak performance for some time—expect 70%. Double and triple check—people are distracted and will make more mistakes. During mergers, reorganizations and transitions I always advise people to duplicate keys, avoid accidental missteps and generally limit multitasking. Whether we like to admit it or not, we will be experiencing anxiety for some time.

Note the impact won't be revealed for sometime. The psychology experiments showing that an individual can rebound from a major stress more rapidly than a series of erratic, low-level stressors are relevant. As I've noted before, men are much less likely to use the "s" word. Cora Daniels' Fortune article on "The Last Taboo" is fun and true.

Regardless of gender, **some people are more susceptible to stress.** These include: thoughtful/reflective individuals, empathetic individuals and those without strong support systems (family, religion or friends.) And one of the few truisms in psychology is that a person's dominant trait becomes more pronounced with stress. A detail-oriented person becomes a micro-manager; an optimistic becomes oblivious to negatives...this can be readily seen with our politicians.

5. **Avoid the echo chamber.** Take measures to ensure that you are not isolated and hear differing viewpoints. A quiet person may have the best strategy/idea, but can be drowned out in tumult. Leaders don't operate in isolation, but seek information before a decision. Utilize technology to obtain input, plus keep people informed. Determine what is best medium for you to use—if you're tired or anxious, wait to talk to people until it's less obvious. As noted before, listen to your voicemail. **Change your voice mail** if your tone is "off. Similarly remind your direct reports and assistant to be warm and positive, plus to advise you if anyone is upset or not acting right. You're not asking them to snitch, but to help you and their colleagues.

6. **Take a breath.** Before a meeting, important phone call or when working for long stretches stop and take a deep breath. Step away from the computer or TV occasionally. **Be good to yourself.** Don't skip meals, sleep or otherwise get too immersed. You and the business will suffer if you are too results-oriented and lose focus.

7. **Make someone smile.** Paraphrasing Carl Sandberg, make at least one person a day happy with an **unexpected positive.** Bring a colleague a cup of coffee, volunteer to help stuff envelopes for a mailing, send a stranger a "well-done" on an op-ed piece or an article...any small gesture. While I can't remember who the commercial is for, I endorse the philosophy behind the pay it forward idea. Make someone smile—they will pass it on— plus it will make you feel better too. It's amazingly easy. And probably good karma too. Many companies and people are being tested—some more than others. Happily we seem to be moving beyond the immediate crisis. Certainly there will be future problems. Just remember, you can't always determine what will happen to you, but you can determine how you'll approach it. Per my favorite saying, "**Leaders play the hand that's dealt.**"