



If leaders can help followers put purpose in their work, sophisticated theories are unnecessary. When people see the importance of what they are doing, no one needs to motivate them. They motivate themselves.

# Paying Attention

## Leadership for Tough Times

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By Daniel H. Straub

Tom Peters and Nancy Austin said, “Leading is primarily paying attention.”<sup>1</sup> If this is so under normal circumstances, it is particularly true during periods of organizational difficulty. Many of

the organizational failures that created the current economic crisis can be laid at the feet of leaders, both public and private, who were not paying attention. Paying attention to what?

### First, the Fundamentals

Many can survive in leadership positions without being leaders when times are good. Growth and adequate

resources can provide cover for not paying attention to the fundamentals. There are several important fundamentals that are particularly important in difficult times.

## Putting Purpose in Their Work

All modern theories of motivation aside, the key to an energized and productive workplace is the single word *purpose*. If leaders can help followers put purpose in their work, sophisticated theories are unnecessary. When people see the importance of what they are doing, no one needs to motivate them. They motivate themselves. In *The Effective Executive*, written 43 years ago, Peter Drucker admonished executives to “focus on contribution.” If everyone can easily determine their contribution to the values and mission of the organization, much of the leadership task falls into place.

## The Power of Service

Leaders have a choice. They can lord it over people, saying essentially, “I’m the boss and you’re not, so do as I tell you,” or they can be of service, asking questions such as “How can I help?” “What do you need from me in order to do your job better?” “What do I need to know from you in order to do my job better?” While the first approach may gain short-term compliance with orders, the second is the only way to long-term effectiveness. Servant leadership is as old as the Bible and as modern as the Marine Corps. It endures because it works. It works because it is right.

## The Last Law of Leadership

Effective leadership requires significant personal investment

and patience to see it through. The last law of leadership is really the entrepreneurial principle, the old biblical law of reciprocity. You have to give in order to get. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. If you want respect, you have to give it first. If it’s loyalty you seek, you have to be loyal first. If you want to build trust, you have to be trustworthy.

This seems risky, and it requires a certain amount of courage, but that’s the only way it works. Effective leaders are committed to something bigger than themselves. They turn that commitment kinetic through energy and initiative. Do that, and followers will appear. They will have individually made up their minds that you are worth following. They will grant you some influence over their lives because you have earned credibility. Thereafter, your continuing task is to serve them as you pursue your jointly held purpose. The result will be a sense of obligation and gratitude on all sides: obligation to one another because everyone is performing a necessary role and gratitude to one another for doing so. When this happens, the foundation for authentic leadership has been built.

## Second, Your Executive Roles

We need to pay attention to the three important roles that Henry Mintzberg saw for the executive: Interpersonal, Information, and Decision Making. These three roles must be executed in sequence if effectiveness is to be achieved by the leader. In difficult times, when cutbacks are likely, there is no room for error in their execution.

## The Interpersonal Role

The executive has three tasks here: figurehead, leader, and liaison. This is the foundation of effective management in good times and bad. Failure to effectively handle the interpersonal dimension of the workplace will lead to failure everywhere else. Management is first of all a people business.

When changes begin to happen, the natural reaction of employees is denial followed by resistance. It takes leadership to turn these responses into a willingness to explore new ways of doing things and a commitment to the future. As Edwin Thomas, director of the Center for Governmental Services at the University of South Carolina recently noted:

Commitment to the organization and its goals decreases as employees grow increasingly concerned about their own survival and security needs. Clearly this has a significant impact on their motivation and morale as well as on the organization’s productivity, quality, and customer service.

In the aftermath of downsizing, the surviving employees will be facing a period of readjustment. They may have feelings of loss, guilt, resentment, and insecurity. As with any loss, adjustment will occur in stages that may include shock and denial, anger, guilt, depression, and loneliness. Everyone adjusts at a different pace. They will require understanding and supportive management in order to accept the new organizational reality and regain their hope.<sup>1</sup>

In short, the leader’s attention must be directed to an often overlooked product of the cutbacks — the

survivors. Effective leaders see people as more than a budgetary line item to be reduced when budgets are tight. They involve employees early and often in suggesting and implementing changes. They create small wins and success stories that the survivors can use to regain confidence in themselves and their organization.

### The Information Role

Once the interpersonal dimension is solidified, the executive has a proper foundation for managing information. There are three tasks here: monitor, disseminator, and spokesperson.

The key is communication. In challenging times there is no such thing as sufficient communication. People need to know what you know, even if it is not much. The leader is competing against the rumor mill, which is notoriously efficient.

In difficult times one must over-communicate. Practice MBWA (management by wandering around) on a frequent, random, non-routine basis. While doing so, commit an unnatural act — listen. Effective communication does not result from merely providing information or issuing directives. A memo won't do it. An email won't do it. One-way communication is not necessarily communication. As one seasoned executive routinely proclaims, "I know what I said. I don't know what you heard." Real communication is two-way. It requires listening skills. It means asking open-ended questions, being accepting of what you hear, and oftentimes restating your message.

### The Decision-Making Role

With the first two building blocks in place, the executive is in position to be an effective decision



maker by performing four tasks: resource allocator, disturbance handler, negotiator, and entrepreneur.

First, one must decide what to cut. Across-the-board cuts are the easy way out. All units are not equally efficient or inefficient, yet this approach treats them as if they were. Effective leadership means keeping the big picture in focus and making decisions based on priorities.

As the executive makes the difficult choices about resources, it must be realized that poorly managed cutbacks can lead to future organizational decline. Researchers have found that four approaches contribute to eventual organizational deterioration:

- Downsizing by attrition and hiring freezes,
- Piling more work on remaining employees (no work redesign or reduction),
- Changing the reward and appraisal systems by eliminating cost of living increases and/or mandating salary freezes, and
- Failure to implement systematic, ongoing efforts to improve quality.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, there are four indicators of organizational improvement after cutbacks:

- Systematic planning and analysis prior to downsizing,
- Gradual, incremental implementation of downsizing,
- Increased communication, and,
- Increased employee participation and involvement in downsizing.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, this approach is going to require some "disturbance handling" and "negotiating." These conflict management skills are essential for effective leadership in good times and bad, but are particularly important when budget cuts must be made.

Curiously, Mintzberg also suggests that the effective executive is an "entrepreneur." This task does not take a holiday when times are tough. In fact, the need for innovation increases. "Yes, despite the decline in resources, any public agency needs to improve performance. This means doing old tasks differently — or maybe even replacing old tasks with new ones. For a growing agency, innovation is desirable. For a contracting one, innovation is essential for survival. Indeed, innovation can help attract quality people and even earn stakeholder support. Yet in the foxhole mentality created by retrenchment, no organization will be innovative without a conscious effort by its leadership."<sup>4</sup>

## Finally, The Architecture for the Future

British scholar C.S. Lewis declared that, "Where we find a difficulty we may always expect that a discovery awaits us."<sup>5</sup> One can use this time of

difficulty to accomplish some things that might have been ignored before — if we pay attention. This can lead to the creation of a framework for a stronger, more effective future organization

### Reengineer the Work: Create the Perfect Delivery System

Even the most efficient and appropriate work processes become antiquated over time. Yet there are few opportunities for organizations to seriously examine their effectiveness in a comprehensive way. When you ask an employee why they are doing a task a certain way, they are likely to say, “Because we’ve always done it that way.”

Difficult times provide an opportunity to eliminate every non-value-added activity in your system. This is what the experts call “human amplification.” Anything you can do to increase the throughput of each staff member is vital to maintaining the performance of the organization. By involving every staff member in the search for ways to combine, eliminate, and bypass certain activities, you can ensure that all time and activities in your work process add value. This is the perfect delivery system.

### Link Tasks and Strengths

Most people join an organization to get a “job.” It is relatively rare to find an individual who joins an organization because they see a good fit between their talents and the organization’s needs. Only 2 out of 10 were able to answer “yes” to the Gallup organization’s question, “At work do you get to do what you do best every day?” In other words, 80 percent of us are mismatched with our work.

Oh well, it’s a living.

During difficult times we have an opportunity to revisit this issue.

**Effective leadership** means keeping the big picture in **focus** and **making decisions** based on priorities.

Certainly there will be increased requirements for the remaining people to do the heavy lifting that others used to do, but there is the corresponding opportunity to link people flexibly to tasks that better use their strengths. By paying attention, leaders can help create a better “fit” between people and their work.

### Embrace Technology

In organizations whose main task is to keep records of account or case status, e.g., insurance companies, court administration, health care administration, most of the work is what economists call “transaction costs.” In other words, perhaps 90 percent



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of the organization's work involved the origination, transfer, or storage of information. These organizations realize significant improvement in transaction costs when manual process can be replaced with an investment in automation.

## Conclusion

The requirements for successful leadership are the same regardless of the attributes of the temporal decision-making environment.

Organizational improvement or deterioration in the aftermath of downsizing is clearly dependent on much more than simply what or how much is cut from the budget. The approaches to decision making and managing the cutback process are also critical determinants of success. But these practices are certainly not unique to cutback management. This is the way successful organizations manage in good times and bad.<sup>6</sup>

Successful leadership in tough times means paying renewed attention to the fundamentals such as:

- Putting purpose in their work,
- The power of service, and
- The law of reciprocity.



It means paying attention to the key dimensions of executive work:

- Interpersonal,
- Information, and
- Decision Making.

Finally, it means paying attention to the architecture of the organization's future, including the need to:

- Reengineer the work,
- Find a fit between people's strengths and their task, and
- Embrace technology.

Every authentic leader has experienced the crucible of adversity. Difficult times bring out either the best or the worst in a leader's character.

They are the sieve through which success is screened. The effective leader understands that tough times are inevitable and prepares for them in advance.

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## NOTES

i Thomas J. Peters and Nancy Austin, *A Passion for Excellence*, Random House, 1985, p.37.

1. Edwin C. Thomas, "The Challenges of Cutback Management," *Public Policy and Practice*, Volume 1, Number 2, March, 2002, University of South Carolina.

2. K.S. Cameron, "Strategies for Successful Downsizing," *Human Resource Management*, Summer, 1994, pp.189-211.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Robert D. Behn, "Cutback Management: Six Basic Tasks," *Governing Magazine*, March, 1996.

5. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*,: CS Lewis Pte. Ltd., 1958, p.28.

6. Edwin C. Thomas, "The Challenges of Cutback Management," *Public Policy and Practice*, Volume 1, Number 2, March, 2002, University of South Carolina.

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