

Leading Successfully in Uncertain Times

by Andy Scantland, Executive Coach, MBA/ CPCC

"It's tough to know what the future holds for our team- how do I lead my team when so much is uncertain right now?"

Leadership- influencing people to follow you- is tough enough when you know what to expect. More and more often these days, it seems the future is uncertain: we don't know what will happen in the marketplace, with our competitors, with our customers, with external factors like government regulation, the social media environment, it goes on and on. Sometimes it seems the only things we know for sure are what we don't know.

We want our teams to feel supported, engaged, creative and resourceful at all times. But getting the best from people is hardest when people don't have certainty about what's in front of them.

People respond to uncertainty in many ways but two reactions are almost universal:

- **We tend to freeze** when faced with uncertainty. Think about the unfortunate deer in the headlights- we don't know how to respond so our tendency is to do nothing, stay in one place and hope the danger passes. Not the most powerful approach.
- **We fill a void of information with our own 'truth'**. Nature hates a vacuum and team members hate not know what is going on. So, the void is filled with rumors and guesses and water cooler chat which becomes the 'truth' about what's to come. Again, not optimal.

So, how can leaders respond? You can absolutely show up powerfully and effectively as a leader in these situations. Here're some ideas, derived both from my experience and from others on the front line.

1. *Acknowledge and validate, then communicate*. Let people know you recognize the discomfort in not knowing what is happening. No apologies necessary (unless it's your fault), but the simple validation that it's human and normal to be unsure goes a million miles. Then, share what you can to fill the void with accuracy, not rumors. Former head of Baxter Pharmaceutical, Harry Kraemer, recommends a simple formula: tell people exactly what you know, what you don't know and when you will get back to them.
2. *Take a stand as a leader*. During crazy times, people will be looking to you for your response. Be a model of calm, conscious decision-making and your people will mirror that. Be a frantic, emotion-driven wreck, and people will mirror that as well.
3. *Take a bias toward action*. Unlock the tendency to freeze by making whatever decisions you can and creating positive action. Even if imperfect, the action can revive energy levels and create a more positive attitude on the team. Know you could make some mistakes but be sure you are learning something at every stage. Says Donovan Campbell, author and former U.S. Marine platoon commander, "...leadership characterized by indecisiveness is one of the surest ways to undermine your credibility with your team."
4. *Go back to your sustaining values*. When you don't know anything else, know yourself. Remind people of the shared values within the organization. Remind them

of the mission and their contribution toward that mission. Remind people of their strengths and that you believe in them. When people remember the big picture, they are less likely to focus on the difficult moments.

We all operate more fluidly with a roadmap in hand and a clear destination in mind. True leadership is most essential when people aren't certain of the path forward. That's your time to shine.

About Andy Scantland, Executive Coach, MBA/ CPCC

Andy is an executive leadership coach, leadership development facilitator, and marketing strategist with a focus on driving business results by supporting the executive's growth and ability to lead authentically. He has supported leaders in the technology, hospitality, communications, financial, education and development industries. His goal is to drive improved organizational effectiveness through individual and team performance improvement, increased engagement, and values-driven leadership.

Andy is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach (CPCC) trained through the ICF-accredited Coaches Training Institute. He is also a certified strengths coach and facilitator through the Marcus Buckingham Company and holds certifications to administer and interpret the TILT365 Leadership Predictor suite of individual and team assessments, a strengths and values-based instrument.

Andy launched his coaching and leadership development firm, Upside Partners, after more than 20 years of corporate executive roles in marketing, business development and strategy at companies experiencing dramatic growth. Unique to his background is a comprehensive knowledge of branding, marketing research, communications, business development and financial analysis.

Andy holds an MBA in Marketing from Emory University's Goizueta School of Business and a BS in Management from Clemson University. He also is a graduate of Harvard University's 'Strategic Planning: Formulation to Implementation' program. He is an experienced college-level instructor in management and marketing, a certified social media leader, and winner of the CLIO, the advertising industry's version of the Oscar.