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Helping you align your people with your vision



Go for the Green:

Four Reminders for Leading in Uncertain Times

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

In Seattle, sometimes February acts like Spring, and this year especially, after the record-breaking snow storms, I noticed the crocuses and primroses with their colorful faces, a brilliant, quick flash at the garden's edge. There are tight buds, too, if you look closely at the grayed branches drab against the grayer sky.

And, as always, the presence of evergreen. It's always green here in the corner of the Northwest. Always green. I remember living in Port Angeles, about two hours west of Seattle and two hours east of the Hoh Rainforest, and thinking "who lives in a place where moss grows on the sidewalks?" Always green.

Perhaps it is more difficult to remain an optimist in less moderate climes? Supposedly, we have more instances of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), winter blues and lost sunglasses, but I always say we Seattleites are the ultimate optimists: we know the sun will return. We know the Cascade mountains, and especially Mt. Rainier, *are out there*, just beyond the fuzzy skyline in winter (and other months, too), and we have *faith*.

So, too, the role of leaders right now as we face uncertainty and some gray skies—we must *know* that whatever ails our organizations, communities or countries will get better; it will be changed for sure, and different, but we will not stay where we are now.

Heraclitus (475 B.C.) *noted*, you cannot step into the same river twice—the water's movement makes sure of it—and thus we can approach the grassy bank with both anticipation and uncertainty—neither of which, frankly, will kill us.

What to do as a leader when faced with gray skies?

- 1. Maintain Perspective.** There are a lot of doomsdayers and naysayers out there. Sometimes they mask themselves in the dark cloaks of cynicism and "I'm just being real" behaviors. Don't buy into it. Choose carefully those you spend time with, listen to and take to heart. Try to remember that underneath the dark cloak is fear of disappointment—cynicism is sure paralysis for organizations and people. If this applies to you, consider carefully: perhaps for now

you might give up your addiction to information? I know this sounds counter to what I usually preach—learn, grow, develop, improve—but incessant media madness (including print, television and Internet) will dampen your spirits at best and make you paranoid at worst. Focus on what's inside your circle of influence and remember that *you always have the ability to choose* how to respond to what happens to you and around you.

2. Be Inspiring. If you're leading others, they're always watching you anyway, but they're really watching you now. Talk about scrutiny. Talk about pressure! The interesting thing about inspiring others is that often it happens because we are inspiring ourselves. What creates positive, life-affirming joy for you? Or if that's just too much for a gray, rainy perspective, what gives you and those around you some sense of relief? Spend time on those topics, activities and projects that mean something to you and to your organization or team.

3. Believe in Your Own Resilience. You will prevail. What's the alternative? If you always have the ability to choose, you can choose something different. Think about times in the past when you made it through a tough or difficult situation? What did you do well? What did you learn? You don't have to know how this will all play out, you just need to stay in the game, and though many have shared with me recently that they just want to "keep their heads down" or be "happy I just have a job," resist that urge

and be willing to be strong and stand out in the crowd. It's the best time to do it—it will differentiate you within your organization or among your competitors.

4. Celebrate Successes, Regardless How Small. One of my clients is going through a second lay-off in twelve months. It's painful. It's heart-wrenching and stressful, but this time, they're better at it. This time, they know what to expect and how to make decisions and treat people well. Along the way, they've improved productivity, communication, and inched along the red/black lines of profitability. Recently, a colleague of mine shared her knowledge of Appreciative Inquiry and the gentle, yet powerful shift this process can create in an organization and among individuals. Ask on a regular basis: *What's the good news? What can we celebrate? How are we succeeding?*

If we're honest, we know that all times are "uncertain" times—it's those gray skies obscuring the mountains or that different river time and again. Our ability to be flexible, resilient and full-of-faith allows us to lead with inspiration and clarity, and perhaps just as importantly, to notice the brilliant, quick flashes of color. We still buy a *lot* of sunglasses out here in Seattle, you know? ❖

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