

Leading During Tough Times

By Bob Prosen

When great leaders and companies get off track they recognize the problems and get back on track quickly.

When you stray, here's how you get back on track and into the winner's circle.

- You need to reaffirm the strategy and the organization's top priorities, put the right people in the right jobs, with clear objectives and measurements to track performance.
- Assign ownership to people who know the business even better than you do, and require them to focus on the significant few objectives. Too often, companies lose focus because they take on too many responsibilities and spread themselves too thin.
- Be clear about what you're asking people to do so that you eliminate false starts. Give them objectives derived from deep thinking, not a half-baked idea. When you communicate clearly, make requests of people, and get commitments, you will make progress.
- Have a measurement system in place to track progress on all of your top objectives. These measurements act as an early-warning system that allows the organization to reprioritize and take corrective action when the landscape changes.
- Discover the root cause of every problem so that you don't waste valuable resources fighting the same problems time and time again. This inefficiency generates unnecessary costs and prevents companies from focusing on what's most important to move them forward and accelerate profitability.

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do You Have the Right Strategy and Top Objectives, Supported by the Entire Senior Management Team? Start here before looking any deeper. If there is any uncertainty in this area, everything else is at risk. Your strategy must provide clear direction in concise language that's easily understood by employees, shareholders and customers alike. Ultimately you have to achieve your profitability objectives. If your strategy doesn't produce sufficient profits, then you must either reduce your cost structure or develop a more profitable strategy. Either way, take specific actions. Don't sit around and wait for something good to happen. The "we could get lucky" approach will only get you into deeper trouble. Deconstruct what's wrong and fix it or get out.
2. Do you surround yourself with smarter people? Each of your direct reports should be giving you sound ideas that you never knew were possibilities. And, given the choice would you pick that person again to be on your team in the same position? Use these criteria to build your team.

3. Do you have formal monthly operations review meetings? This is one of the most effective ways instill accountability and consistently achieve the organization's objectives. It's the perfect forum to review results, remove roadblocks, ask for assistance and hold people accountable for producing results.

4. Do You Keep People Focused on Achieving the Company's Top Objectives? Have you identified your top objectives, and do people know them and see how what they're doing helps achieve them? Communicate objectives, hold people accountable and visibly post key objectives and performance so everyone knows how they're doing daily. Meet regularly with your teams to discuss progress against goals.

5. Do You Manage People Too Closely? If so, back off, and learn to delegate. Let people do their jobs. However when things get off course, it's time to roll up your sleeves and get as involved as necessary until you're confident the situation has been corrected.

It's not fair for good people to be burdened with the incompetent. When you need to make a personnel change, do it. Cut the dead wood.

6. Are You Helping People Prioritize Actions in Alignment with Key Objectives? Everyone wants to do it all, but in reality, you can't. Help the organization triage initiatives and give them permission to stop doing a number of tasks.

7. Are meetings effective? Pop into meetings and listen. Are people solving problems and talking about things they need to do to move the company forward, or are they focused on complaints, excuses, and extraneous issues? Explain how to effectively conduct meetings focused on achieving results and hold them accountable for immediate improvement.

8. Are You Watching for Team Members Who Are Focused Internally, Not Externally? Be aware of negative politics that show up in e-mails, in meetings, in the hallways, and in break rooms. When you hear people talking about "what's best for me" instead of what's best for the company, nip it in the bud.

Focus behavior on the success of the team, not the success of the individual. That being said, you still need to recognize individual performance and success in context with how it supports the company's goals.

9. Are You Asking People What They Need to Succeed? When you ask someone to do something and give them a deadline, you also should ask them if they have everything they need to make that deadline. If not, deal with it immediately. When people fail to meet objectives or deadlines, ask what specific actions you can take to achieve the objective. What's required from others?

10. Are You Watching for Busywork? Attend to staff and other corporate functions, such as accounting, HR, and IT. Are they engaging in non-essential

work and generating unnecessary reports instead of actions that support the company's top objectives?

11. Have You Run Out of Time to Plan? Are you always running to keep up, missing commitments, attending too many meetings? Are you predominantly in a reactive mode? Do you regularly take vacation? Does everyone seem to come to you for answers? The devil is in the details. It's time to release some of those details.

Make The Right Decisions

Make decisions that have the biggest impact. If you're involved in small decisions, you're not working on the right things. Here's how you fix it:

1. Determine your top three priorities. Write them down and keep them on your desk to avoid distractions.
2. Delegate more. Delegation is not abdication. You don't turn your back. Stay involved at appropriate points until your goals are realized.

After you reprioritize, schedule time for planning and for thinking about the Big Picture and the Next Big Thing.

Institutionalizing Success

To achieve extraordinary performance and profit, you must

- Demonstrate relentless pursuit of vision and results
- Show an unyielding commitment
- Face tough realities – never rationalize
- Recognize the distinction between profit and cash flow versus revenue and growth
- Surround yourself with experts
- Have clear objectives.
- Have accurate and timely metrics to evaluate performance
- Act quickly to overcome problems as they arise
- Run lean
- Build a culture based on accountability and focused on execution
- Encourage a free flow of information
- Remain flexible and adapt readily to change
- Reward results, not activity
- Have a support group

Remember the greatest payoff of sustaining and accelerating high-performance results and profitability is that it provides your company with choices unavailable to competitors.

At the beginning of the day, it's all about possibilities. At the end of the day, it's all

about results.

Take the Leadership Assessment to see how well you lead for results.
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