



## Uncertainty's Antidote: Three Leadership Imperatives

*A BlessingWhite White Paper by Stephen Parker*

No one knows whether the worst is behind us. This means that, despite your bold strategies, decisive reactions to market fluctuations and carefully thought out survival plans, many of your employees are looking for the nearest rock to crawl under. The prevailing attitude is to wait and see how the drama unfolds. Uncertainty and fear can paralyze even your best performers.

### **Are you up for the task of coaxing your workforce out of the bunker and leading them forward?**

If you're known for your business acumen as well as your people savvy, then you probably have what it takes to inspire the employee commitment, concentration and action required to drive your latest strategy. It will be an arduous journey. If you're like many leaders who have been promoted for financial performance and exceptional technical knowledge, you may find this leadership challenge to be your toughest yet.

Focusing on three leadership essentials — **trust, communication and engagement** — can help ensure that your organization weathers today's uncertainty, emerging perhaps bruised but positioned for a bright, sustainable future.

### **Trust**

Our [State of Employee Engagement 2008](#) report, based on data collected at the start of this global recession, revealed that *substantially more employees place trust in their immediate manager than in senior executives*. In North America, only half of survey respondents trust leaders at the top.

The embarrassments of Wall Street, corporate scandals, government mismanagement, shrinking nest eggs, rise in foreclosures and the ominous and growing ranks of the unemployed have only added to the average employee's cynicism. If you think you were among the 50 percent of executives who had trust before, don't count on it now. You need to earn it every day.



**Trust others.** Although you may need to be more prudent and scrutinize decisions more than you did before, stop short of [micromanaging](#). If you want to be trusted, you have to show that you trust your employees. Make sure everyone knows the ground rules for decision-making in this cautious environment, clearly communicate new parameters or constraints and then allow your employees to apply their talent, creativity and initiative. There is simply too much to be done to afford you the luxury of constantly checking everyone else's work. And if you start doing their jobs, then they might start doing yours.

**Reveal yourself.** In these bleak and sometimes menacing times, employees will follow you only if they know and trust you — the person behind the title — a human being with visible but not fatal flaws, with values that weren't just garnered from a Hallmark card and with unique strengths and characteristics that draw people toward you. Make sure you deploy these differentiators and ensure that your employees know who you are as a leader.

**Do what you say.** Business conditions have thrust all leaders into an unforgiving spotlight. The moment your words and actions appear incongruent you will lose whatever trust you've earned. So think twice before you commit. This is the time to under-promise and over-deliver. If you espouse organizational values, double-check to make sure your decisions and actions align with what you profess.

**Stay visible.** You and your peers may need heads-down, closed-door time to rework strategies or crunch numbers, but your workforce wants accessible leaders. Visibility reassures. It says “we as leaders intend on stepping up and addressing these issues head on . . . if there are difficult decisions to make, we'll make them and keep you informed.” And being visible isn't about bringing your workforce to *you* for a series of meetings. Rather, you need to go where they are. Bring yourself — and your message — to the communities that exist and the conversations already occurring throughout your organization. Join weekly sales meetings, drop by lunch groups, post to your firm's social network and ask to kick off scheduled training sessions virtually or in person.

## Communication

As a leader you may spend hours agonizing over your messages to employees, knowing that clear, frequent communication can quell rumors, re-focus energy and assuage anxiety. But have you considered why they might discount everything you say? Have you considered what employees need to hear — not just what you want to share?

Clearly, people are disillusioned, worried and angry. And it doesn't matter whether their emotions are influenced by your own actions or by the behavior of leaders they've met only through media. They're not likely to be a receptive audience. And whilst it's tempting to retreat from employee emotions, avoid difficult topics altogether or defend your innocence as part of the larger community of victims, don't.

**Acknowledge emotions . . . sincerely.** Don't offer up the pabulum of “it's a leader's job to make the tough decisions.” Your workforce knows that. Forget the generalities like “I can sense anger” or “I know that everyone is worried.” They'll fall flat and sound insincere. To

successfully acknowledge emotions you need to really think about what, specifically, employees are feeling and why. How is your organization's situation affecting them personally? What have they lost — or are afraid to lose? What “undiscussables” are on their minds? What are they talking about the second you leave the room?

**Take accountability.** You need to stand in the firing line, at least metaphorically, for example: “I know some of you are angry *with me* about this decision . . . and it's understandable that you feel that way . . . and I want to talk about it . . .” or “You may be thinking, ‘What in the world were leaders *like me* doing while our customers started canceling orders’ . . . I know you deserve an answer, so I want to address that today.”

**Ask for feedback and respond carefully.** Your well-intentioned, thoughtful messages will be long forgotten if you blow the Q&A with more primitive, less-leader-like behavior. Don't fish for the “right” question for your prepared answers. Simple questions can veil concerns, so make sure to *clarify the question behind the question* before you respond. Do you really understand what the issue is? And the feelings associated with the issue? And when you do speak, take care not to crush ideas inadvertently, discount the question or imply that the person asking the question is merely misinformed or overly emotional.

**Create shared hope.** You may not be able to supply all the reassurances that employees crave. You *can* provide perspective and a vision on which they can focus their energy — and start to reshape the conversation. You might start by expressing gratitude that, despite the choppy waters of the recession, your organization is still afloat. Which specific acts gave your firm some breathing room? Which individuals can you highlight? What can you say about your organization's mission — its reason for being? How are your products and services relevant now? What strengths do you have as your competitive advantage? Looking ahead, when the clouds break, what's your vision of long-term viability? How can you describe that vision so employees feel like it's worth fighting for? Describe what's possible but don't make promises.

## Engagement

Engaged employees are not just committed, passionate or proud. They have a line-of-sight on their own future *and* on the organization's mission and goals. They are enthused and in gear, contributing discretionary effort on the things that matter most.

Near the start of the recession our [State of Employee Engagement 2008](#) report revealed that *fewer than one in three employees are fully engaged*. That wasn't the best starting point for weathering a stormy economy. Now you need employees to stay focused and productive despite taking on the ghost work of laid-off colleagues, paused pet projects, eliminated perks, ever-shifting priorities and the distraction of the latest market headlines telling them their 401ks have been crushed again. [Employee engagement](#) is essential.

**Provide clarity and meaning.** Do your employees know their three most important priorities out of all the items on their to-do lists? Those top three probably look quite different than they did three months ago. Are employees clear on how their work supports the organization's goals? Wherever possible, give them the direction they need to focus their effort and talents — and the reassurance that what they do is mission-critical.

**Provide opportunities to shine.** This is also the time to encourage stretch assignments to address organizational imperatives *and* provide the growth and development that feed engagement. You may not be able to give promotions or provide formal training; you can identify meaningful projects — work that matters and will enable employees to acquire valuable experience and build their personal portfolio of skills.

**Manage your own engagement.** Just as a dead battery cannot jump-start another, *you cannot successfully engage others if you yourself are not engaged*. If you're feeling burnt out or disconnected, step back to reconnect with the source of your convictions. Ask yourself: Why

do you come to work each day? What aspects of your work provide the greatest satisfaction? What personal values can act as your rudder — the steadying force through uncertainty? What do you stand for as a leader? In light of your convictions and your understanding of market realities, where do you need to focus *your* discretionary effort and unique skill set?

## In Closing . . .

Clearly, no one discounts the importance of business savvy, courage, market intelligence and decisiveness in leading your organization forward through an unpredictable market. However, trust, communication and engagement are required for your workforce to *move forward with you*. These leadership essentials help ensure that you get all the savvy, courage and brainpower of *all* your employees.

**Trust** enables employees to relax a bit and to focus their energy on what you ask them to do (rather than on trying to uncover your hidden agenda). It smoothes the way for collaboration and risk-taking. **Communication** — two-way conversations, not one-way messaging — provides a forum for employees to constructively express their worries or anger, then move on. It enables you to reframe the context of your organization's situation from fear to hope, from doom to optimism — and describe a future worth fighting for. **Engagement** provides the focus and fuel for success, ensuring that all employees are rowing in the right direction with all the energy they can muster.

Your leadership decisions can have a dramatic impact on the people around you. You can help employees cast off the paralyzing and negative effects of uncertainty and change and begin to take small but vital steps forward. If you pay careful attention to these three imperatives, you can help ensure your organization's success despite this sour economy — whether it lasts three months or three years.

Our analysis of assessment data for more than 1,400 executives with whom we've worked indicates that the most effective leaders exhibit qualities associated with business competence *and* personal connection. In fact, high scores in empathy and trustworthiness were *most predictive* of overall leadership effectiveness.

Unfortunately, most managers score lower in personal connection than in business competence, placing them at a disadvantage for harnessing employee talent and initiative during unsettling business conditions. Today these managers are faced with a watershed moment, where they will learn if they truly can lead.

View a brief presentation on leadership [competence and connection](#).

# In Summary: A Leadership Checklist for Uncertain Times

## Trust

- Do employees understand the new ground rules, as appropriate, for decision-making and resource allocation? Do they understand who/what may be scrutinized and why?
- Are you allowing employees to use their initiative and expertise? Or are you micromanaging them?
- Do people know you? Do they know what you care about, personally? Have you shared your strengths? Have you disclosed relevant weaknesses?
- Do you overpromise and have to back-track?
- Do you do what you say you're going to do?
- Are your decisions and actions in line with the values you espouse?

## Communication

- Are you clear on what you want to say?
- Do you understand the emotions and concerns that may prevent employees from hearing or accepting your message?
- Are you prepared to address employee emotions head on? Can you articulate, with specific examples, their concerns?
- Can you describe your role in this situation? Do you understand why employees might be upset with *you*?
- When you listen to an employee question, do you ask follow-up questions to fully understand their issue? Or do you rush to jump in with the answer to the question you think (or hope) was asked?
- When you respond, do you acknowledge employees' feelings and provide clear, candid information?
- Do you regularly express gratitude for your workforce's patience and persistence?
- Can you articulate why your organization is relevant now? Why its mission is still important?
- Can you describe the future that you believe is possible? In detail? So much detail that employees are inspired to make it happen?

## Engagement

- Are *you* engaged?
- Do you know why you come to work each day? What you stand for as a leader?
- What personal values guide your decisions in spite of the uncertainty around you? What steadies you? Keeps you grounded?
- Are you clear on the organization's direction?
- Have you clearly articulated that direction?
- Do employees understand the three most important things they must do now to move the organization forward?
- Do employees understand why their role is critical to the organization's success now?
- Do you encourage employees to take on mission-critical "stretch" projects?
- Do you encourage employees to apply their unique talents and interests to make a difference in the organization's success?

## About BlessingWhite and This White Paper's Author

**BlessingWhite** is a global consulting firm dedicated to creating sustainable high-performance organizations. Founded in 1973, the firm has worked with almost three million professionals in thousands of organizations. [www.blessingwhite.com](http://www.blessingwhite.com)

Senior Vice President [Stephen Parker](#) leads BlessingWhite's Consulting Practices, shaping the firm's thought leadership and content development. He partners with clients on critical business initiatives, providing executive coaching, senior team facilitation and consulting on human capital strategies. Stephen is a popular speaker, having presented on the topics of culture, leadership, coaching and employee engagement for, among others, SHRM's Annual Conference, Linkage's Annual Leadership and Coaching Conference, Society for Pharmaceutical & Biotech Trainers Conference, NEHRA, Synygy's Sales Effectiveness Conference and many regional events. His articles have appeared in *Leadership Excellence*, *Focus*, and *U.S.1*, and he is a regular contributor to BlessingWhite's monthly [eNews](#). Stephen is based in BlessingWhite's Princeton, NJ, headquarters and can be reached at [sdparker@bwinc.com](mailto:sdparker@bwinc.com), 800.222.1349 x8195.

