

strategic reflections

Managing in these challenging times



By Jim Butts

In challenging times such as these, successful management and leadership are all about meeting expectations. When many people hear that statement, the first thing that comes to mind is meeting the expectations of upper management. No doubt meeting and exceeding senior management's expectations is of primary concern in these days of cutbacks, furloughs, layoffs, plant closings and bankruptcies, but these are not the expectations that need our primary focus.

Managers and leaders in public companies often believe that shareholders' expectations should be pre-eminent. The organization's share price and standing in the financial community are of course always a priority. Not only does meeting or beating the Street's expectations provide a broad, visible indicator of success, profitability, economic vitality and future viability to millions of people who monitor the market, but it can also drive and determine equity and compensation formulas for many individuals. However, those expectations must become secondary, as well.


There's no question that meeting customers' expectations is more important than ever. Customers vote with their wallets and voice displeasure with their feet—they will either spend with you if they feel well-treated or go quickly elsewhere if they have any doubt about the value they will receive from you. And when spending slows and the dollars stick to consumers' fingers like flypaper, the slightest misstep in knowing what the customer expects will give any of our many competitors an opening they are likely to gleefully exploit. Still, while customers' expectations are of utmost concern, they are not the expectations that determine how your organization will do.

In many organizations the statement about the importance of meeting expectations brings "stakeholders" to mind. Employees, suppliers, vendors, the community at large, society, the public good—all these groups have expectations and are willing to patiently review them with you as often as you are willing to give audience. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of meeting

these groups' expectations in today's highly visible, interconnected, smile-you're-on-YouTube world. But those are still not the expectations we are talking about.

In these challenging times successful management and leadership are all about meeting one person's expectations: yours. The expectations of an effective manager and/or leader in an organization drive success more than any other factor, especially in challenging times. This is because most organizations do not have a rich legacy of success practices to call upon or fall back on when the economy slows, the easy sale goes and everything that worked before seems to have lost its magic.

The effective manager/leader must find new ways to succeed. We need to be creative, be innovative, blaze new paths and take chances. An element of risk taking must be embraced; you cannot wait for perfect information, nor can you emulate others' best practices in such conditions. The clock is ticking, and there is not enough time. He who hesitates is lost or let go. And communication skills become the most valued skill of all. We must lead by example but be loud and clear on where we both go and take our teams, groups, divisions or organizations. We need to voice our expectations to anyone and every group likely able to support our new initiatives. We must make decisions, take action and communicate, communicate, communicate.

This is especially true in strategic account and supply chain management where the success of our programs, projects and organizations is so linked, interconnected and dependent upon the performance of our partners, vendors, customers and suppliers. Decisions based on the best information available, bolstered with bold creativity and reinforced by world-class communication throughout the supply chain—that is what will get us through. Our expectations of success, risk taking, unselfish contribution, mutual support, persistence/commitment and continual communication are the expectations that matter, mean and accomplish the most in these challenging times. 

Jim Butts is a senior vice president at C.H. Robinson Worldwide Inc. (www.chrobinson.com).