

Leading in the “New Abnormal”

By: Bruce McAlpine

Welcome to the challenges of your “Corner Office!”

- Canadian Economy (rising interest rates, inflation, risk of recession)
- Supply Chain (rising costs of parts and raw materials, uncertainty of supply, broken JIT inventory model)
- Labour (shortages of skilled and unskilled trades)
- Working environment challenges (impact of work from home, in office or hybrid options)
- Global political tensions (Russia vs Ukraine, USA vs China, UK vs EU, etc.)
- Succession *planning* (as the last of the Boomers take their retirements from leadership positions)

How do you lead successfully through this? Depending on the impact each of the variables listed is having on your business – adopting an Avis strategy of “we try harder” might not be good enough.

A Military Model

Let’s take a look at the military model. Military leaders recognize that there are things they can’t control (like their version of the list above) and things they can control, including:

- Their mental and physical preparation;
- Their support; and
- Their team, whom they know and trust.

They wouldn’t think of entering a military operation without an “**O Group**” (basically a focused team meeting which follows the **SMEAC** agenda (**S**ituation; **M**ission; **E**xecution; **A**dministration & Logistics; and **C**ommand & Signals (i.e. Communication)).

So, when they are rappelling out of the helicopter into the dangerous swamp, they can go with confidence.

Different Day, Similar Swamp.

What does this look like in business?

Preparation

Your team needs to be adequately prepared for the future. This covers the **Situation**, the **Mission** and the **Execution**. They need to have a clear understanding of the external threats and opportunities (which they can’t control), as well as their internal strengths and weaknesses (which they can optimize or minimize). They need to have a clear and precise description of their goal, and how they are going to achieve it. Also, they need to have a clear understanding of the limits of their freedom to act (authority, responsibility, and accountability). As you assess the business landscape before you, be sure to engage your team in the process, getting them ready for what lies ahead.

Support

Your team needs to understand the support they can expect from their peers/colleagues in supporting departments, and what is expected of themselves in return. This covers the **Administration & Logistics**. It may involve some additional training, capital investments in plant and equipment, or technology, and cross-functional meetings to identify potential bottlenecks. Remember that we normally find bottlenecks at the top of the bottle. We don’t want that happening here!

Team

Your team needs to act as a team, trusting each other, looking out for each other, and relying on each other. “Teamwork” is a familiar concept, but it has become much more difficult to achieve with existing teams over the past 2+ years of COVID restrictions, and even more difficult to achieve with new team members. As leaders we must not simply assume that we have good teamwork – we must actively work at it in ways that are meaningful and engaging to our team members.

Other Business Principles

Beyond these military principles, there are some general business principles which need to be overlaid, including:

- Time Management
- “Expert” Support
- Communication
- Rewards

Time Management

Recognizing you only have a limited number of hours in a day, you need to apply Covey’s 3rd habit of highly successful people – effective time management - “ first things first!” A “triage” may be required to determine what challenges or opportunities to tackle first.

“Expert” Support

You may need to form special “task forces,” selectively picking your very best people to come up with solutions to the unique challenges and opportunities the organization faces. You may even need to bring in some outside consultant[s] to join these task forces – experts who are not afraid to speak “truth to power” and who can provide a necessary “outside perspective.”

Communication

Open, timely and relevant (i.e. tailored to the needs of the audience) communication will be crucial, both upwards and downwards in the organization. This covers **Command & Signals**. It will allow for course corrections on the fly as unexpected challenges and opportunities are discovered. Regular communication will also allow leaders to gage the morale of their team, and provide encouragement and support. Good examples of this are Winston Churchill during WW2 and Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the current war between Russia and Ukraine, whose regular communications had significant impacts on their respective battlefields.

Rewards

In the military, medals are awarded as public and visible acknowledgements of exemplary service. In business, the rewards will be different. They could be promotions, bonuses, trips, time off or even simply verbal “attaboys.” But they should be public and visible. Public recognition of effort and achievement are a simple yet significant method of encouraging positive behaviours and fostering engagement and loyalty.

Bottom Line

Clearly, the future viewed from today is a lot more nebulous and challenging than it was yesterday. However, with adequate preparation and a focus on the levers we can control, the opportunities are endless. So let’s get out there and **“Carpe diem” – Seize the Day!!!**

About the Author



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Fulcrum Search Science Inc. is a Toronto-based executive search firm solving Mission-Critical hiring challenges throughout North America for 50 years. Bruce is also a Past President of the Association of Canadian Search, Employment & Staffing Services and a Past President of the Royal Military Colleges Club of Canada. Bruce is a member of the Robbinex Cooperative Network, a platform for connecting trusted professional advisors and business consultants in varying specialties.

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