



The Way Back Core Values Illuminate the Path

BY MARK W. WILLIAMS

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For business leaders willing to learn, there have been a lot of lessons in the past 12 months.

Chief among those lessons is the value of adaptability in the face of change. The best managers are those who can adapt to change on the fly. That has been true in the most challenging days of the coronavirus pandemic, and it will continue to be the case as we recover and move forward. When facing uncertainty, whether it's the current pandemic reality or another crisis, your focus should be on the well-being of those you are leading. I've faced a number of crises as a business leader (the pandemic and the Great Recession in 2007 being the primary examples), as well as many less challenging but still difficult times in between. In all of these times of turmoil, the well-being of my employees and their families has always been the primary concern around which I have made business

decisions. When your workers are struggling with uncertainty and confusion, it doesn't put them in a good position to serve your business or your customers well. Effective managers and leaders should always recognize that their role is to inspire, encourage, and motivate their employees, through good times and bad. So how can business leaders make that happen in the current pandemic and eventual recovery?

Ultimately, it boils down to having a unified vision that everyone in the company has fully bought into. When your organization has that vision, clearly communicated to and understood by everyone working there, you'll find that the impact reverberates through all aspects of your business.



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WHAT ARE YOUR CORE VALUES?

At the highest level, this means you need to step back and identify your organization's core values. These are the guiding principles for the organization, and they should inform every decision you make. For example, one of the core values at my company is teamwork. This goes back to my belief that I must make business decisions that prioritize my employees' well-being; otherwise, I am neither being a good member of my organizational team nor setting them up for success.

To me, teamwork isn't just doing my fair share of work on a project. It means actively listening to my employees and their needs, doing what is necessary to address their concerns, and removing roadblocks from their path. That gives them the freedom, and peace of mind, to tackle their day-to-day tasks most effectively. That sort of teamwork is impossible without intentional communication.

TRANSPARENCY IS PARAMOUNT

How does this apply in our current pandemic-stressed reality? As much as it's possible and appropriate, I believe in 100% transparency. When you sugarcoat the hard truths facing your organization and team, it can result in confusion. The best approach for managers and business leaders is to communicate consistently, clearly, and transparently.

When COVID-19 caused my company to abruptly shift to remote work, we gave people a clear plan to follow to get set up. In the year since then, we've continued to be clear and precise about what our plan is and the expectations of our leadership surrounding working from home versus in the office. With the economy continuing to be in flux and our business seeing ongoing impacts from the pandemic, I've chosen to be transparent about our financial situation and about new opportunities that have presented themselves.

MAKE SURE COMMUNICATION IS OPEN

I look for ways to encourage our employees, emphasizing what we do, why we do it, and why we're not going anywhere. And the need for communication cuts both ways. I've increased opportunities for employees to express their concerns, needs, fears, and thoughts with myself and other

managers through virtual chat times. Especially during turbulent times, people want to be heard, so it's crucial to give them clear channels to express themselves.

A leader needs to be available and present for his or her people. Whether you're leading a Fortune 500 company, a mom-and-pop store, or any other kind of business, let workers know that you're listening to their concerns and that you take them seriously. During troubled times, in addition to transparency, availability and authenticity are two keys to engaging and inspiring the people you lead. When you solicit feedback from your employees (and customers) and then listen intentionally to their responses, you will breed trust and confidence in your leadership.

When you have everyone in the organization on board and pulling together in alignment with your core values, you have a much better chance of success, whether you're executing on your annual plan or attempting to navigate the road back from the pandemic. And if you haven't established your organizational core values before, now is the best time to fix that.

SETTING GOALS

And that brings us to the value, and necessity, of setting goals. I usually recommend going through a goal-setting process on an annual basis, with quarterly check-ins and revisions. With the unpredictability of the last 12 months (and into the future), you'll likely find benefits in setting goals that can be reviewed and adjusted a little more fluidly.

When you're setting goals, make sure they always tie back to the core values you've established for the company. In the pandemic, we've all had to make some hard decisions, and we will continue to face challenges through the end of the pandemic and in the recovery process. But if you've gone through the effort of building trust and getting buy-in from your employees, you don't want to throw it out the window in the name of some short-term gains during a challenging season.

Once you've set your goals, especially during any sort of crisis, it's so important to communicate them. Just like your core values, make your goals clear and ensure understanding across



your team or organization. People need to know what they are working toward, and why. If you can share the purpose behind each goal and get employees to see how they support the core values, they are more likely to become cheerleaders in meeting those goals. And when challenges arise or you fail to meet a goal, own up to it. Let your employees know what's going on and invite them into the process of assessing what went wrong and figuring out where to go next.

After all, your people can offer significant value to you and your

company. We've all been forced to pivot during the pandemic, and you may have employees who have discovered new strengths you can tap into. The most effective leaders set their goals not only on the basis of their balance sheets but also with their resources in mind. As clichéd as it might be to say, your people are one of your most important resources. As much as you can, bring them into the process as you set and adjust goals, especially during times of uncertainty. You may be surprised by the benefits you'll discover.

This relies, again, on clear and effective communication between managers and their employees. Business leaders can set the structure and expectations for the overall company, but if they're not in direct communication with everyone in the organization, they need to rely on layers of management to carry messaging from the top down, as well as from the bottom back up.

THE VALUE OF MANAGERS

Skilled managers can drive a company's vision and business goals forward, despite constant change and bumps in the road. Whether or not individual contributors understand how their efforts impact the company's ability to meet its goals, and whether or not they are in alignment with the core values, is dependent on their managers understanding and communicating those things to them. And for business leaders who are focused more on the big picture of the company's overall direction, there is a necessary reliance on team managers to be the eyes on the ground—seeing what's working, what's missing the mark, and where there needs to be a pivot.

Effective and well-trained managers can make sure that happens, and they can ensure success even in times of constant change. The pandemic may be the most significant crisis your company has ever faced, but it surely isn't the only one. During challenging times in the past, whether they involved missing financial targets or dealing with underperforming employees, you have likely relied on managers to be true leaders, balancing the needs of the organization with the needs of their employees.

Right now, it's important for managers at any level to be patient. That can be difficult to do, even more so in times of turbulence, but a patient attitude flows from the top down and can help alleviate stress across the board. That goes for dealing with people and in decision making as well.

In challenging times, it may be tempting to make knee-jerk decisions and adjustments, but that will likely result in poor choices being made. Managers and business leaders must take the time to weigh all relevant factors, from broad data sources, before coming to a conclusion—although still in a timely fashion. But if your managers are working to meet clear goals, flowing out of understood core values, and have established channels of communication and trust with their employees, your organization will be well situated to handle the constant change of the ongoing pandemic and the uncertainty of the recovery process.

I'll leave you with one final thought: Don't overlook the value of levity. Finding the positive in any situation and bringing laughter into even the darkest day will go a long way within your organization. Look for ways to remind people that times won't always be so hard. And if you've established a basis of trust within the organization, built on adherence to and application of your core values, you'll help employees weather whatever the day may bring. AQ

*Mark Williams is the president and CEO of Brokers International, one of the industry's largest field marketing organizations—providing annuity and life insurance solutions to independent insurance and financial professionals across the nation. He is also the author of *Lead, Don't Manage: 12 Lessons in Creating a Leadership Culture Based on Core Values* (2020).*

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