



A Credible Leader for Turbulent Times: Examining the Qualities Necessary for Leading into the Future

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This article introduces a credible leader with leadership qualities that are needed to successfully lead an organization through the turbulence of our present world. These credible leadership qualities include: 1) a demonstrated competency in leading an organization through turbulence; 2) an honorable intent in the eyes of his or her people; 3) a commitment to personal and staff learning; 4) a leader who is comfortable dealing with people and cultures different from his or her own; 5) a future-oriented leader who studies the current driving forces, searching for likely futures the organization may experience; 6) a leader with a sense of personal creativity and innovation, as well as the capability and commitment to provide an organizational environment conducive to creativity and innovation. Finally, this article presents suggested steps for the reader to develop him or herself into a credible leader for turbulent times.

“Hey, turn on your television!” David yelled. “A large jet just crashed into a tower of the World Trade Center.” That day was September 11, 2001; a day I and most of the world will always remember. Turning on the television, I saw the fire in the upper portion of one of the twin towers. Everything felt surreal, like it was just a movie. I could not fathom how this might be an actual live newscast. As I watched, another plane approached the other tower. The announcers were screaming. You could hear people in the background yelling. That second plane hit the second tower and flames shot through the building. Not much later another plane hit the Pentagon.

I knew that America was under attack and this was not a game; it was for real. Buried in the moment, all that I could think of was, “What more is coming? Is there something I need to do to protect my family?” I had never been through an attack like that in my life. I did not know how to deal with it. I remember I felt helpless and confused.

The 9/11 feeling of helplessness and confusion paralleled my feelings during my first experience with a bank merger. My world suddenly turned upside down. The reliability and security of the future changed in an instant. I thought I would be retiring from my employer, but suddenly I faced an unknown future. Leadership was going to eliminate my job and I was faced with unemployment. My twenty-five year career suddenly evaporated.

Not only was I facing unemployment, but to receive my exit package I had to remain through the entire merger process to work within various leadership responsibilities. With that news, I felt almost panicky. I knew nothing about bank mergers and had never been through an experience like this. How I wished I had a guide to lead me through it, but nobody that I knew in the organization had ever been through a merger before.

My responsibilities pulled me in two directions: coping with the present turmoil and helping prepare for our yet-to-emerge future. My job assignment included consolidating all the accounting, customer service and paralegal processes of both the corporate and business banks into a single unit. My newly assigned merger role was acting as a liaison with the purchasing bank in the transfer of the corporate and business bank loans, while continuing to supervise the note accounting and paralegal effort. I was not only dealing with loan transfer responsibilities, which were new to me, but I also had to daily deal with the fears of the employees I supervised during this time of turmoil and doubt.

In both of these situations, the turbulence of the clash of the unknown future with the present disruption overwhelmed me with feelings of inadequacy and loss. I knew nothing about what to expect. I had no prior experience on which to base my decisions and actions and no mentor to guide me through.

While I felt ill-prepared for the responsibilities that senior leadership expected me to perform, not going forward was not an alternative. It was critical to both organizations that we transfer the assets to the purchasing bank without disrupting the value of the assets in the process. It was critical to me that throughout the change period, I help my employees (who were also my friends) with their personal and career concerns. It was my impression that the human needs of people were low on the list of priorities of the selling or purchasing banks. I felt angry that the people who made our bank a great organization were now incidental to the process.

My second bank merger experience outwardly appeared similar to the first merger, but inwardly was a contrast. The process was identical: shifting assets and liabilities from our bank to the purchasing bank and laying off the unnecessary staff. Many of the staff and leadership received the announcement of the merger with feelings of turmoil and confusion because this was their first experience with a merger. However, for those of us who had previously gone through a

merger, our experience carried us. We had contagious confidence that we would survive this one even if we were once again unemployed.

The significant difference between the two mergers lay in senior management's commitment to the personal needs and feelings of the staff. Many of us who were part of the selling bank were in senior management and because of our prior merger experience we believed the human side must be an equal concern with the business side in the merger process. In this second merger, senior leaders provided much more information about the process and the timing throughout the communication chain. They provided counseling and job out-placement services, as well as departmental parties to answer questions and to encourage staff. Leadership's skill in leading the merger and their displayed concern for the people made them credible and as a result, the staff felt less threatened by the turmoil.

I gained three primary lessons from my experience with 9/11 and two bank mergers. First, prior experience with turbulence provided a platform for the knowledge and skills necessary to weather future turmoil and provided greater contagious confidence in dealing with chaotic uncertainty. Second, I learnt that the ability and commitment to learn from our experiences and education provided us the capacity to prepare for future uncertainties. Third, I learnt that people are not just data points, business input factors or a human resource; they are individual lives with hopes, dreams and fears and are valuable just because they are people. Even if a leader has the knowledge and skills to deal successfully with turbulence and the ability and commitment to learn but does not value people, there is no purpose in the effort.

Our Turbulent Present-Day World

"Turbulent" describes both our current world and our organizations within that world.¹ At times in today's organizations, conditions are so turbulent that organizations risk business crises and serious setbacks.² Less and less in our current organizational environment, does the view ahead seem predictably comfortable. More and more, the unexpected happens that destroys business-as-usual and everyone scurries to deal with the hard tasks of chaos and change.³

The words "the economy" no longer represent a condition of only a single nation; economic changes in one nation now affect the whole world.⁴ What once was a local market has now become a global market with a whole new set of informal, unstated rules.⁵ Technology and commodity life cycles change so quickly that often by the time something new is available for sale, someone is developing a newer innovation.⁶ Technology and worldwide media bring close what once was distant.⁷ The formerly healthy economy has now become volatile and unpredictable.⁸ In light of today's turmoil, what leader will best lead today's organization into this emerging and yet-to-emerge world?

Organizations need leaders who have the experience to adapt quickly to our yet-to-emerge turbulent world. For this current and future world, today's leaders need to be learning leaders able to foresee and prepare. Since the future will likely be different from today, leaders cannot draw the needed strategies solely from their previous experiences.⁹ These leaders will need to study the world around us to look for the implications of driving forces and then look forward to create possible yet-to-emerge futures from which to create new strategies to engage those futures. At the same time, these leaders need to train up the next generation of leaders capable of creatively and innovatively addressing the future they will meet. Since people make up organizations, these leaders will need to be credible leaders with hearts that hold a high moral value for people.¹⁰

The Qualities of a Credible Leader for Turbulent Times

The following section of this article introduces Chris, a hypothetical leader drawn from a composite of capable leaders. Using a story format, this article highlights the qualities necessary for leading in turbulent times. This section also presents suggestions for becoming or producing a future credible leader for the future.

A credible leader demonstrates competency

Chris has been a banker for over forty years, enough time to accumulate knowledge about the industry in turmoil situations and to develop a high level of skill to engage problems as they arise. Chris has the "track record" and the "ability to get things done."¹¹ Through the years, Chris's experience through the turmoil of several mergers and economic cycles has prepared him to face the future confidently. He has gained not only the skills and knowledge to handle specific issues as they arise, but he has also gained the confidence to deal with future challenges.

A credible leader demonstrates honorable intent

Chris' employees consider him trustworthy because they have seen years of a consistent match between his words and actions, a proof of his integrity.¹² Keeping his word regardless of the personal cost, preserves his integrity and builds his credibility within the organization.¹³ During times of wrestling with the decisions while the outcome remains undecided, it is always subject to change. However, for Chris once there is a shaking of hands or the parties sign the agreement, the outcome is locked-in as much as Chris is able to assure it.¹⁴ During turbulent times leaders must build their credibility on integrity. The trust of the members of the organization, associate organizations and even competitors rises and falls on the perceived integrity of the leader.¹⁵ Because of the credibility of the leader, members of the organization will find turbulence less threatening.

The staff at the bank perceives Chris as a person of high moral values.¹⁶ His strong moral values about people provide a platform for his credibility.¹⁷ During these turbulent times members of Chris' organization believe they are all operating with similar values, those in the interests of the organization as well as the interests of all the members of the organization.¹⁸ While many leaders might use their positions for self-interest, excluding the interests of the organization and its people, Chris will do what is right, considering himself to be a servant of the staff rather than just their leader.¹⁹

Chris proved himself to be a leader concerned first about the interests of the organization and the people within the organization and even willing to sacrifice his own interests from time-to-time.²⁰ During turbulent times an organization needs people who can focus on the needs of the organization. Employees will not perceive their leader as credible if they believe their leader is self-serving.²¹ It is therefore critical that a leader demonstrates concern for both the organization and the people within the organization.²²

All of his employees recognize that Chris cares about them. To engage the turbulent world successfully, a leader will cultivate a caring environment in which workers willingly take more risks, are open about their needs and ready to accept the challenges of the organization.²³ When the workers feel the leader is caring, they will be more willing to share creative ideas helpful to the organization. When the workers sense that leadership cares and understands their personal world, they will respond with concern for leadership.²⁴ When the workers feel that leadership is willing to sacrifice for the organization and for all the workers rather than select groups, the workers will step up to the challenge.²⁵

Many leaders say that they have an "open door" policy, but Chris lives it. For years he has lived out a management tool referred to as "walk-around" management,²⁶ showing up unexpectedly at all levels of his organization and making himself available for questions and comments. Due to his demonstrated openness to discussion, employees feel leadership wants their ideas. A credible leader during turbulent times will need to remain approachable rather than aloof from those within the organization.²⁷ This does not mean that in an organization of thousands of employees, everyone has access to the president, but it does mean there needs to be some means for all employees to be able to communicate their concerns to leadership. The key is that the employees sense leadership's concern for them and their ideas.²⁸

A credible leader, such as Chris, will be empathic during turbulent times.²⁹ It is one thing for a leader to be approachable; a leader also needs to understand the lives, thoughts and experiences of other people. People are not statistics or just points of data. The people in an organization have individual dreams, hopes and fears. A leader must emphasize with and relate to the lives of the people within the organization.³⁰

A credible leader demonstrates a commitment to learning

A leader during turbulent times needs to be an intentional and a continuous learner.³¹ Chris believes the days are gone when leaders and staff can rest securely on their current knowledge and abilities. Now with our continuously changing environment, Chris believes a leader and staff need to constantly learn to keep up with all the changes, problems and possible solutions.³² With the growing diversity in the workforce, a leader needs to learn about,³³ and from, the people within the organization.³⁴ A leader needs a means of obtaining information and a time to study. The leader also encourages the development of a learning organization that values contributions from all levels of the organization.³⁵

Chris makes sure that everyone in the organization has the opportunity and encouragement to be a continuous learner. Part of caring for people is developing them for future success in our turbulent world.³⁶ When the workers are growing in knowledge and skill, they will increase their capability to serve the organization.³⁷ Just like the leader, the workers cannot rely on past knowledge and skills to carry them into the yet-to-emerge world. The continuous and rapid change occurring today that requires the leader to be a continuous learner also requires all the people of an organization to continually expand their knowledge and skills.³⁸ The leader makes learning relevant by providing the atmosphere conducive to using new knowledge and skills.³⁹

A credible leader thinks as a cosmopolitan

In our cross-cultural and cross-ethnic world, Chris remains comfortable with the wide diversity of his staff and customers. Working in a market heavily engaged in global commerce, Chris continually seeks greater understanding of international businesses and cultures. Chris has committed himself to the continuous learning of other languages. To be credible like Chris, a leader during turbulent times will need to be cosmopolitan, one who is comfortable with multiple cultures and ethnic groups.⁴⁰ In the past, organizations did business mainly in their local markets, within the boundaries of their own country, but today with all the international markets, organizations now do business, or compete, with organizations around the world.⁴¹ As people of the world continue to move among countries, employers find their workforce increasingly diverse.⁴² As cosmopolitans, leaders need to be comfortable engaging people different from themselves;⁴³ this means they will recognize all people as unique individuals.⁴⁴

A credible leader looks to the future

Strategic planning has been a commitment of Chris and his leadership team. A credible leader during turbulent times needs to think into the future while working effectively in the present. Formerly, organizations were able to keep up with the slower rate of change, however, the increased rate of turbulence has forced organizations to adapt faster. Today and into the future,

organizations no longer have the luxury of adapting to what is currently emerging. To be credible, leaders will find it necessary to imagine rapid changes that are yet to emerge and communicate this vision of the future throughout their organizations.⁴⁵ Credible leaders need a creative and innovative vision for the future, while effectively leveraging their current operating capacity.⁴⁶

A credible leader encourages creativity and innovation

Since he was young, Chris has always enjoyed creativity. Now that he is a leader, he wants to build that same spirit of creativity in others. Before an organization can ask its people to be creative and innovative, the organization and its leaders must create an atmosphere conducive to open sharing of ideas.⁴⁷ A significant barrier to organizational creativity and innovation is people's fear of embarrassment, ridicule or revealed lack of value.⁴⁸ When a leader communicates to organizational members, messages such as, "we encourage creativity and innovation" and then allows sending a message such as, "that is a dumb idea," the leader will reinforce people's fears. Even a little thing such as not responding to an idea sends the message that creativity is not welcome. To encourage creativity, credible leaders must consistently reward employees' efforts, even when their staff's efforts do not appear to be successful.⁴⁹

A credible leader prepares people for turbulence

The credible leader stands out as an unusual leader. Just as our hypothetical Chris did not protect his staff from turbulence but rather led his staff through the turbulence, a credible leader will not save people from turbulence; he or she will instead prepare them for and lead them through the experience.⁵⁰ Because of Chris' credible leadership qualities, his team is able to embrace turbulence as part of their life experience.

The Credible Leader as a Guide in a Turbulent Environment

The credible leader is not a "super" leader. He or she is simply a leader who is credible and truly cares about others. This leader possesses knowledge and skills, as well as a heart that holds a high moral value for people and personal integrity. This leader sets personal self-interest at a level no higher than the interest of the organization or its members and lives his/her life to match.

During these turbulent times, organizations need leaders who are credible. Organizations need leaders:

- With honorable intentions
- Who commit themselves and their people to continuous learning
- Who think as cosmopolitans

- Who look into the future, creating various scenarios and preparing the organization for those likely worlds
- Who are creative and innovative and commit themselves to providing an atmosphere of creativity and innovation in their entire organization

Because of the credible organizational leader, the members of an organization will be able to accept and embrace turbulence as part of their life experience, making them better equipped to address the challenges born out of turbulence.

Developing Leadership for Turbulent Times

The U.S. Marine Corps provides an example of an organization that develops leaders to be able to lead in times of turbulence.⁵¹ Besides conventional training, the Marines use role-playing scenarios that put trainees into chaotic conditions, preparing them to respond quickly to the unexpected. Repeated mock turbulence experiences develop the necessary leadership qualities, allowing Marines to make prepared action decisions quickly and to preserve their credibility in moments of high-tension. Like the Marine Corps, organizations can create programs to develop their capable leaders for turbulent times.

Many of you are asking yourselves how you can become a credible leader who is fully prepared to lead an organization through turbulence. You need not be subject to the whims of chance. You can start today with the following steps.

- Decide to become a credible leader, ready to lead in turbulent times
- Find a mentor who is a credible leader with experience leading through turbulence
- Commit yourself to following through with your mentor's directions

Some of you are already credible leaders with the qualities expressed in this article. You may be wondering how to develop more leaders capable of leading in your organization in these turbulent times. The following action steps will help your organization during these times of chaos.

- Commit yourself to being a mentor, to develop future leaders fully prepared for leading in turbulence
- Seek out employees with leadership potential
- Develop an intentional and formal program of mentoring with a carefully laid out scope and sequence to include all the skills and knowledge needed to be a leader in turbulent times
- Enroll followers committed to training others in the skills they will learn

- Turbulent times will not disappear, therefore organizations planning on surviving and thriving into the future need credible leaders prepared to lead in our future uncertain times.

Endnotes

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