

FIREWALKING:

Leading teams successfully through uncertain times

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Firewalking

Leading Teams Successfully through Uncertain Times

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You’re leading a team of people through the risk of uncertain times. Infighting has started in the chaos, confusion and fear about what’s going to happen next.

It’s at this point that leading a team through uncertainty can start to feel as if you’re walking over hot coals or facing a solid wall of flames.

No matter how prepared you thought you were for this job, you were not ready for this.

Yet, you carry on because you must. You try to appear bold and fearless. You try to inspire confidence in the people who are counting on you to lead them through whatever lies ahead.

Still, there are moments (more than a few) when you want to turn back, but you don’t, and you can’t.

You’re the one in charge.

Making Your Way
Through Change

I have never been lost, but I will admit to being confused for several weeks.

–Daniel Boone

Don't let yesterday use up too much of today.

–Will Rogers

Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens.

–Jimi Hendrix

The road to success is always under construction.

–Unknown

The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.

–Nelson Mandela

What does it take to succeed as a leader in uncertain times?

Leadership success, even under the best of circumstances, requires many different skills and strengths. Here are a few of the most important ones:

- Be clear about your mission
- Create a compelling vision
- Check your assumptions
- Plan with different scenarios in mind
- Set up a strong but simple team structure
- Know your roles – and be ready to change them
- Communicate, communicate, communicate
- Create a strong community
- Get your oversight right
- Remember, this time won't last forever - and it may be your finest hour

Let's take a closer look at each one:

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR MISSION

Focus.

What is your goal? Everything you do should focus on this.

If actions don't zero in on your prime target, and do that in a significant way, especially in uncertain times, those are activities you may need to set aside for now.

Focus on current customers or clients, and those you can serve well in the near-term future, even if they aren't customers yet.

Be Clear About Your Mission

Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction.

–John F. Kennedy

Creativity and artistic endeavors have a mission that goes far beyond just making music for the sake of music.

–Herbie Hancock

When you discover your mission, you will feel its demand.

–W. Clement Stone

Here are some of the questions you and members of your team should be able to answer accurately and consistently about your customers:

- Who are your customers and primary prospects? In other words, who do you serve best?
- What are their priorities? In what order? (And how do you know, for sure? It's important to know, not just guess).
- What are their “make or break” requirements – the things they must have in order for them to bring you their current and future business, instead of taking it to one of your competitors?

Here's an even more fundamental question:

- What must they have in order to continue to buy your type of product or service, at all - from anyone?

CREATE A COMPELLING VISION

Any team – at any time – is more effective with a compelling vision to guide it. When the economic pressure is on, as it is now for many companies and industries, that vision may be one, purely, of survival. More often, a vision is focused on long-term horizons. These may include such goals as opening new markets, creating new products and bringing them to market, or solving major company or industry issues through major innovation.

A strong and engaging vision is vital to help guide you and your team through the stress of uncertainty, past the noise of fear, beyond the chatter of doom and gloom prognosticators.

You may be saying to yourself, “We have real problems! We don't have time for that ‘vision’ thing! It's fluff! We need meat! We need real substance!”

A vision – fluff? Oh, it's far from it!

Create a Compelling Vision

Live out of your imagination, not your history.

–Stephen Covey

Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

We are limited, not by our abilities, but by our vision.

–Unknown

There are many examples we can each cite – whether in sports, social change, politics or in times of war or economic distress – that demonstrate the power of a compelling vision to energize and create major change.

And remember, just as a perfectly clear vision of the future doesn't exist, a perfect vision statement or image doesn't exist, either – not on the first pass.

Don't worry if the vision you and your team create needs refinement after your first draft. It evolves, over time. The most important question to ask yourselves is this: is the vision you have created one that is compelling for your team, now? Does it engage and energize the people you are leading? Can and will they support it with their ideas and action?

If so, for your purposes now, it is a success.

How do you create this compelling vision, either working on your own, or with a facilitator, if helpful?

1. Begin with what you each know and feel and what you aspire to achieve, as a team. Express that as a group. Talk about what is ahead – both what you know, and what you don't.
2. Discuss your feelings about the challenges you face and what you must do to succeed in present and foreseeable circumstances. Be honest about what you're going through, and what's ahead for you, as a company or as a team. Honesty pays, especially when circumstances are difficult.
3. Create a team vision from what you have learned and expressed. Your vision can be a short, powerful statement of your goal, or a simple and engaging drawing that clearly, tangibly expresses what you are driving toward.
4. Post your vision in a central place to continuously remind your team of the future they are striving for, and creating together, as you move through the days ahead.

Be Clear About Assumptions

Begin challenging your own assumptions. Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in awhile, or the light won't come in.

–Alan Alda

In a start-up company, you basically throw out all assumptions every three weeks.

–William Lyon Phelps

We simply assume that the way we see things is the way they really are or the way they should be. And our attitudes and behaviors grow out of these assumptions.

–Stephen Covey

CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

You may be saying about now, “We don’t have any assumptions. We can skip this step.”

The correct answer, however, is this: “Oh, YES you have assumptions! Skip this step at your own peril.” Seriously.

Unknown assumptions can be like an iceberg – or a volcano. What you don’t know CAN hurt you, your team, your company, your customers – all of these, and more.

Seeing what the group’s assumptions are – and how similar or different they are among the various people whose efforts must be well-aligned in order for you to succeed – is vital. Remember, you need all members of your group working together, rather than at cross-purposes.

And assumptions, when they are flat out wrong or when they clash, can siphon off lots of energy, goodwill, and creativity, to say nothing of precious and limited cash – even in the best of times.

Create a time, a place, and a simple, clear way to surface your differences so you can harness and direct all that energy in a positive direction. You and your team may find a facilitator helpful for this work.

1. Start by asking members of your team, anonymously, what they assume, and why, about:
 - The challenges you face
 - Your strengths and weaknesses, as a team
 - The primary things working against your success
 - What resources you have to be successful
 - What resources you need to be successful
 - What each person can do to make the team successful in these challenging times, even beyond what they normally do in service of your success

Plan with Scenarios

It's not what you accomplish in this life that matters...it's what you overcome.

—Arizona Diamondbacks

The measure of success is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with, but whether it's the same problem you had last year.

—John Foster Dulles

Good plans shape good decisions. That's why good planning helps to make elusive dreams come true.

—Unknown

Good fortune is what happens when opportunity meets with planning.

—Thomas Edison

2. Compile the responses.
3. If need be, test some of the assumptions. On one hand, they may turn out to be untrue. You can eliminate worries about these. Or some assumptions may spotlight issues you were not even looking at that could, in fact, radically affect your progress and ultimate success. Check the facts in areas where you have questions and concerns about what you're discovering.

Now, more than ever, it is essential that you master the practice of making sure your team is aligned on common goals, working from common ground, and eliminating invalid fears and assumptions so you can concentrate attention and efforts on positive, results-generating actions.

PLAN WITH SCENARIOS IN MIND

You already know that your first plan didn't work. What's next? Planning with scenarios can help, much more than you might guess.

Consider this – would you go onstage in a Broadway play, into a major league baseball stadium as a new pitcher, or into battle without significant planning, preparation and practice, having taken into account a huge range of possible outcomes and contingencies?

Scenario analysis sounds complicated, but it's not. It works by loosening your grip on the future you now expect. It opens your eyes to many possible futures, and helps you prepare for seemingly far-fetched circumstances that can, in fact, become real.

In its simplest possible form, scenario analysis is a brainstorming tool. It generates critical team dialogue, and heightens awareness in the team of cues and data you can monitor to anticipate and be prepared for whatever happens. The process of building scenarios increases the flexibility and quality of your planning, and improves your responsiveness. You're essentially beginning to rehearse how you'd handle each circumstance, as a team, as you create and work with each scenario.

Plan with Scenarios

Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.

–Alan Lakein

Let our advance worrying become advance planning and thinking.

–Winston Churchill

Organizing is what you do before you do something, so that when you do it, it is not all mixed up.

–A. A. Milne

It pays to plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.

–Unknown

Here's a simple approach to use scenario planning for a future challenge:

1. Define the problem. What's your challenge, in one sentence?
2. List the primary forces that could drive change in this situation. Is availability of qualified employees critical? Are economic trends, regulatory issues, industry or technology trends important to you – or could they be? What other significant forces must you monitor and be ready to respond to quickly, and well?
3. Create a matrix. On the left side, list the primary forces that could drive change for your industry and company. Across the top of the matrix, list these outcomes: "best possible case," "most likely case," and "worst possible case."
4. Imagine you're in the middle of the three different circumstances, the "best case," "most likely case," and "worst case" for each driving force. Write a few details on the matrix about each circumstance to capture your ideas. For example, do you anticipate the supply of qualified employees to be excellent now and always, or do you anticipate it will change in a significant way in the future? Are those "best cases" or "worst cases"?
5. Stretch even further. What circumstance could be even better than you've imagined for each driving force? What could be even worse than you'd dared to picture? Working through these more extreme outcomes leads to new insights. Many companies have found that working with these previously unconsidered cases accelerates their preparation, teamwork, trust and resiliency.
6. Build the most likely scenario. Is this the same picture you imagined when you began? The odds are that, having stretched your thinking, you see some new areas of caution or opportunity.
7. By this point, you may have accomplished as much as you want to with this simple version of scenario analysis. Or you can do further work, gathering data and doing more detailed analysis to identify which scenario seems to be most likely.

Set Up a Simple Team Structure

Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.

—General George Patton

The best teams...have one important thing in common: their team structure and processes cover a full range of distinct competencies necessary for success.

—Jesse J. Garrett

In reality, serendipity accounts for one percent of the blessings we receive in life, work and love. The other 99 percent is due to our efforts.

—Peter McWilliams

Whether your work is done now, or you want to do more research, save your matrix for later use. Capture the most significant scenarios in some way, such as through drawings, metaphors or by writing a phrase that expresses each possible circumstance succinctly.

Some time in the future, compare what actually happened with the scenarios you imagined. You might be surprised at the quality of the crystal ball you created with this simple exercise.

SET UP A SIMPLE TEAM STRUCTURE

Some people hate structure, and will chafe at any boundaries you put on them.

Others can only thrive in a structured environment where boundaries, rules and expected behavior are known.

Only you know what the right amount of structure is for your organization. Yet in times of uncertainty, people often need just a little bit more. Being able to count on the controllable factors within their immediate environment can provide your team a sense of comfort and security.

Particularly in uncertain times, make sure that you have clear roles, decision-making processes and authority, and clear ways to communicate and check in with each other as time goes on.

Your employees' or team members' time, energy and attention are limited. Now more than ever, make sure you provide clear pathways for action and communication, and clear priorities so all employees' efforts contribute directly to reaching your targets in the best, simplest and most powerful way.

For example, what are the most critical processes for your team or company to execute flawlessly now? It is important that all processes are effective, of course. Yet, as times change, priorities for process excellence change, as well. Is it most vital now for you to excel at accurate and timely order fulfillment, or accurate product and materials forecasting, for example? Those are just a few of many possibilities.

Have Clear Roles – and Be Flexible

The most important measure of how good a game I played was how much better I'd made my teammates play.

–Bill Russell

Flexibility is one of the key ingredients to being successful. If you feel like it's difficult to change, you will probably have a harder time succeeding.

–Andrea Jung

Be infinitely flexible and constantly amazed.

–Jason Kravitz

What will bring customers to your company in these difficult times if you get it very right, and drive them away faster than you can imagine, if you get it very wrong?

KNOW YOUR ROLES – AND BE READY TO CHANGE THEM

Challenging times require role flexibility. This greatly increases a company's resilience, and ability to move and respond to changing market conditions and new business opportunities. This gives an organization the "bench strength" it needs to be able to assign key players wherever they are needed as priorities change.

Yet uncertain times also require stability that employees can count on. They need to be able to focus, as much as possible, so they can produce the work and results that your customers require, especially now.

Unlock the answers to the following questions:

- What are the most essential roles for your organization now?
- What are your priorities for the short- to mid-term future?
- Which people handle ambiguity well and have shown they can make good decisions, even in conditions where information is limited?
- Who can lead most effectively now by building employee confidence, providing clear and calm direction, and keeping everyone focused, in the midst of uncertain circumstances?
- What is the best match of your strong results-builders to the roles that it is most essential that you fill well now?

It's also important to realize when you need to go outside the company to hire or "rent" specialized skills you require, but do not have. As the leader of the company or team going through great uncertainty, your focus must be on creating positive action and results - and ensuring that

Communicate Well

Be sincere; be brief; be seated.

–*Franklin Roosevelt*

The problem with communication... is the illusion that it has been accomplished.

–*George Bernard Shaw*

It is very hard to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings – much harder than to say something fine about them which is not the exact truth.

–*George Eliot*

Argument is the worst sort of conversation.

–*Jonathan Swift*

The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.

–*Joseph Priestley*

you do not fall into the unproductive, suspended state of animation that many companies fall victim to in the midst of uncertainty.

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

Clear communication is vital, no matter what type of organization or economic times you work and live in.

High-quality communication is especially crucial when pressure is on, but highly stressful situations often make it harder to be a clear and effective communicator. That's because people on both sides of the message – the senders and the receivers – are often busy juggling multiple business and personal priorities in the midst of uncertain circumstances.

To increase the quality of your communications during a high-risk time:

- Simplify the messages.
- Simplify the communication process and tools you use.
- Be consistent in using the tools and processes you say you will.
- Repeat key messages using multiple channels, such as websites, email, speeches, 1:1 meetings, and more.
- Create simple, consistent communication guidelines that people can count on. For example:
 - Where can people find basic information they need to do their jobs, if roles change inside the company?
 - Who or what, in general, is the best source of current, complete information for your company or team now?
 - Where should people send ideas and information that they think may be vital to the group's success and welfare, if they have some to share?

Create Community

We were born to unite with our fellow men, and to join in community with the human race.

—*Cicero*

One generation plants the trees; another gets the shade.

—*Chinese proverb*

The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows...in what far place my touch will be felt.

—*Frederick Buechner*

The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.

—*Jane Addams*

- Spell out other key information and communication guidelines. Make sure all of this information is clear, current, easy to access and use so that your communication processes are valuable and can be trusted.

CREATE A STRONG COMMUNITY

Create a process and a way for your team to check in regularly with each other as you move ahead. Make the check-in process strong enough to support the team, yet light enough that it does not constrain action.

Create a community structure that you think will work well to provide some stability in what may be rapidly changing circumstances. Then, be prepared to adjust if you discover that your solution is intrusive, rather than supportive and inclusive. You may find that your team requires a different approach in order to confidently maneuver these times. For example, perhaps regular conference calls work better than lots of in-person meetings at a busy, stressful time. Experiment to find what works best for your particular team or company.

Some things you might try in order to create this simple, yet supportive community structure include:

- Set up an internal website where online training, regular communications, and other forms of important information sharing are available.
- Provide and encourage use of online, teleconferencing, as well as in-person alternatives, to meet the needs of employees who may be working together from multiple sites, if that is relevant for your company.
- Create ways for members of your team to get to know each other on a personal level, such as by discovering affinities they have in the way they like to spend their free time, the charities or causes they believe in, or similar backgrounds they may have.

Set Up Oversight Right

There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people.

–Robert Frost

Every undertaking looks like a failure in the middle.

–Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.

–Leo Tolstoy

The quality of a leader is reflected in the standards they set for themselves.

–Ray Kroc

Approach the game with no preset agendas and you'll probably come away surprised at your overall efforts.

–Phil Jackson

GET YOUR OVERSIGHT RIGHT

When the team is under pressure, it is even more vital that you have and communicate clear guidelines about customer-focused standards, goals, use of limited resources, and team behavior in the disarray you may feel.

For example, team members may be frustrated by uncertainty, and may want to act out in various ways (like it or not), some of which may not be acceptable. Even if they're frustrated, angry, or frightened, their energy needs to be directed toward making the best of a tough situation.

Is there behavior that's acceptable, and behavior that's not? If so, make expectations clear.

And then, live up to what you say.

Your team is watching you very closely. If you make a firm statement – positive or negative – and then don't back it up, they don't know when to trust you, and don't know what you really mean. Your consistency, predictability, and reliability, as a leader, is especially important now.

Uncertain times often require new attitudes, skill sets, or perspectives. The urge to retreat to comfortable, known behaviors is especially high during a time of change or unpredictability. Make it easier to move ahead. Reward desired behaviors, especially those that are new or unfamiliar, and support the direction you are moving, as a group.

Put clear indicators in place, if you can, to help members of the team choose their actions and behaviors so that they support your team goals. You, as a leader, can't be all places, all the time, nor should you expect to be. Put the structures in place that enable your team members to be as self-guiding and self-managing as possible.

During times of high stress, your company's revenue and even its survival may depend on how well new and essential skills and behaviors are applied and supported.

This Won't Last Forever – And It
Might Be Your Finest Hour

Let us therefore brace ourselves
to our duties, and so bear
ourselves that...men will say,
“This was their Finest Hour.”

–*Winston Churchill*

I have been impressed with the
urgency of doing. Knowing is
not enough; we must apply.
Being willing is not enough; we
must do.

–*Leonardo da Vinci*

We must become the change
we want to see.

–*Mahatma Gandhi*

REMEMBER – THIS TIME WON'T LAST FOREVER AND IT MAY EVEN BE YOUR FINEST HOUR

In crisis lies great opportunity.

You can make significant, positive, long-term changes at uncertain times, when old ways of doing things no longer work, and “new normal” practices must be created.

Above all, focus on your vision, your customers, your team. Work your way through the fog of uncertainty using all the resiliency you already have...and a little bit extra.

Just remember, your path won't be straight. Your team won't always get along. Truth be told, your own leadership might sometimes waver.

No person, no team and no situation is perfect. But you can bounce back and find your way through these great challenges.

Your best asset now? It may be some of your toughest experiences from the past. Having a few battle scars means you've survived before, and probably learned a lot in the experience. You are here to tell the story of that life and those times.

The same thing will happen today, tomorrow and far beyond. You will live through this, and will have another great story to tell.

You will survive, yes – and can even *thrive* – this leadership firewalking experience.

About the Author

Jan Richards, principal of J. G. Richards Consulting, helps companies to improve their profitability and revenue while decreasing business costs and complexity. These benefits are achieved in many ways, such as by:

- Clarifying customer-focused visions, goals and priorities
- Developing clear, effective, easy-to-use strategic and action plans
- Streamlining operations to focus clients' time, money, talent and attention on their most vital challenges and opportunities
- Implementing effective, user-friendly business process design, management, and improvement practices
- Short- and long-range coaching for clients and teams who are working to make steady and significant progress on major goals

To learn about how Jan can help you, too, call 408-249-7287 or visit:

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