

Friday, December 25, 2009

People First

Commentary: What have you learned in 2009 that will make you a better leader in 2010?

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Dallas Business Journal - by [Ashley Forbes Kellogg](#) Contributing writer

Everything happens for a reason. The key is to look directly at the situation from every possible angle and ask yourself, what does this mean to me, my family and my business? What lesson am I supposed to be getting from this?

Let's revisit a comment in last month's column: Brent D. Williams, managing director of The Halifax Group, mentioned a group of CEOs that he was speaking to in November 2008. When asked, "Will your business be up, down or flat in 2009?" 95% of them said their business was going to be up. The irony of this response is worth mentioning again — all those businesses are flat or down. The ability to recognize whatever is happening right now and how it relates to the situation is critical. You would be amazed how often we discount, deny and vigorously discard what's going on now in an attempt to keep ourselves safe from the reality that threatens to swallow us later.

It's human nature to let sleeping dogs lie — but what if the dog is dead?

Great business people have struggled this year on one level or another. What's appealing is what they have learned that will make them better leaders in 2010.

Here are some quotable insights given to me by Dallas-area business people on the lessons of 2009:

"A key learning in 2009 was to listen to your gut and not be overly swayed by those who predict catastrophe. In the fall of 2008, there was a now-infamous article circulating the Web, written by an extremely high-profile venture capitalist. He forecast a great depression, and as a result, many venture capital boards instructed their CEOs to hoard cash and slash investment. It was wrong then, just like 10 years ago during the Internet bubble it was wrong to spend every last nickel to capture as many customers as possible without regard to profit. The lesson is simple. A good CEO must be very aware of contemporary macro forces, but only the CEO knows his company the best, and as such, the CEO must follow his gut and do what's right."

— **Alan Masarek**, CEO, Quick Office, www.quickoffice.com.

"In lean times, the focus must be on 'what's coming next.' You should be ready with strong relationships and relevant strategies to meet the needs of your internal and external customers when the good times come again."

— **Kym Sosolik**, director of leadership and organizational development, SMU Cox School of Business Executive Education, www.exed.cox.smu.edu

“Being rational and thinking positive is a leader’s job. And as a leader, that is easier said than done. Don’t hide reality from your team; they need to know what’s taking place within the organization.”

— **Angelo Antoline**, president and creative director, *mundayMorning*, www.mundaymorning.com.

“This is no time to forgo exemplary service in reduction of cost. No one ever saved their way to profitability. Be vigilant in all aspects of your business. Keep your head up and keep moving forward. Never forget to say thank you.”

— **Don Clampitt**, chairman and CEO of Clampitt Paper Co., www.clampitt.com.

“People and relationships are even more important in tumultuous times. Appreciate everyone in your life: clients, family, friends. Work hard to overcome challenges, especially in these uncertain times, but remember to be thankful for your blessings.”

— **Mary Louise C. Hopson**, principal at Marketing for the Professional Services, mlhops@sbcglobal.net

“The true character of leaders tends to become exposed in bad times. When times are good, it is easy. But when times are bad, leaders often don’t accept responsibility, share in the pain and work fiercely to protect their loyal team members. Treating employees as if they are numbers in a spreadsheet and categorically dismissing them as if they were just that — numbers and not people — is a fatal mistake.”