

## A Right Sized Attitude in a Downsized Market By Valarie D. Willis

What is it going to take for leaders in organizations to thrive and keep their teams on track in this economy?

There are five key attitudes that leaders should possess to survive this downturn and downsized market.

Today's down economy gives every leader the opportunity to display a new sense of courage, a new sense of innovation, and a new sense of creativity within their work environment.

### The Right Sized Attitude

What does the right attitude look like for today's environment? I have long been a believer that the right attitude, combined with the right competencies are core leadership attributes.

I recently watched one of the cook-off shows on television. There were five bright and talented personal chefs, all competing for the big win. One of the chefs did not do well on one of the challenges and from that point on, the defeated attitude that this chef had was undermining her ability to perform. This show reminded me that when a leader is under pressure, when the environment has changed and there is a lot of ambiguity, the leader needs the right attitude to stay on course.

**1. Positivity:** Leaders need to eat, sleep and breath being positive at all times. This does not mean a leader takes on a Pollyanna attitude, but the leader tries to see the opportunities in the midst of the downturn. It also means that leaders diligently look for positive things that are going on in the organization, with clients and customers and in the world. Take every moment to turn what could be perceived as a negative into something more positive.

For example, if you have not yet reached your sales goals, the usual stance is that leaders focus on how far behind they are on the goal, or how much more needs to come in. Turn that around, first acknowledge what has been done and if someone has gone the extra mile to help achieve part of the goal, stop and celebrate that. Then focus on where you want to go.

Break that large goal into more manageable chunks for people, so that they can experience small victories along the way. Let the success of a small victory help you get to the next milestone.

**2. Creativity:** What better time than now, is it for leaders to stretch their creativity? Innovation and creativity occurs when the pain of something is too great to bear, or the need is so great, or your passion is so great, that something needs to change. During these times clearly the pain and the need should be enough to move leaders into a position that says, “look let us try to do things differently” and take a creative look at situations.

Now is the time for leaders to look at how their systems, processes and structures are either helping them to stay alive in these times or getting in the way of them becoming more competitive during this time.

### **Setting the Stage for Ideas**

Now is the time to seek input from all those people who are still working in the organization. Leaders need to ask them how we do it differently, how do we do it better, what one thing would you suggest that we change in order for us to become more competitive in the marketplace? The answers may surprise you. Leaders should foster an atmosphere that allows for the freedom of expression of new ideas. Even ideas that may initially seem ‘far-fetched’ can turn into winners. Remember, the telephone was once considered a ‘far-fetched’ idea.

If an organization does not know how to be creative, then take the time to introduce creativity in small doses to the organizations. Take your meetings outside into the fresh air and start having conversations of how things could be different. Sometimes just changing the environment for people will help them to think more creatively.

When want people to be creative it takes more than just telling them to be so, we need to provide them some sort of stimulus. Introduce the problem or opportunity to the team and tell them to think about it for awhile. To stimulate their thinking, bring in a stack of diverse magazines and have people look at pictures as they think about the problem. The pictures will help to stimulate their creativity, and ideally new thoughts should emerge.

An attitude of creativity would help us to start reframing our problems and opportunities. I love the example of the watermelon problem in Japan how they took the problem of not having storage space to store those large oval watermelons and turned it into an opportunity by growing square watermelons. That is creativity at its best. It was not a group of idealists, or creative people, or even marketing people that solved this problem. The people who solved the problem were the ones who were experiencing the pain of a problem; which were the growers of the watermelons.

What’s your “watermelon problem” and how can you change it?

**3. An Attitude of Sharing:** The best leaders during a time of crisis will find stories to share with their organization that helps remind them of where they are going , where they have been and of how they can get through the tough times. In every leader's toolkit, they should have an arsenal of stories that they can bring out during the time of need.

If your organization is going through some tough changes right now, look back into your life and share a story with your team about a time when you had a tough change to go through and how you managed to get through that change. People need to hear the stories about how others have survived the change process.

If your company has experienced a downsizing and you are trying to get the team back on its feet, share how you have personally survived a downsizing. If you do not have that experience, then you should speak to your employees individually and see if any of them have experienced downsizing before and how did they survive and how did they come through it. What were those attributes that kept them afloat during these difficult times? Leaders have to remind their team of better times ahead, just as we remind ourselves of a better economy ahead.

The more personal you can make the stories the better. The stories you share have to be authentic and meaningful. When they are, these stories will touch the heart and souls of individuals.

Great leaders are also great storytellers. Leaders find the stories within them, which engage and inspire their teams to want to go take the next step.

### **Telling Great Stories**

Telling good stories takes practice. The first step is to find the right story to tell that illustrates the point you need to make. A good way to create a treasure chest of stories is start thinking about the categories. Here are a few to consider, courage, changes, downsizing, success, meeting a tight deadline, hope, and there are others. Once you have your categories, start writing down the story you could tell.

For each story that you have listed, write the objectives, key points and takeaway for each story. Write the story out, they do not have to be long. Be sure to include enough detail to keep it interesting, but not so much that it rambles.

**4. Courage:** Leaders need to have courage. They need to have the courage to make the tough choices and to not allow status quo to creep in. The very processes that worked well for leaders just a year ago may not be working well for them now. Instead of trying to hold on to the way that it has always been done, or the traditions of the organization, the leader needs to have the courage to make the necessary changes.

Many people tell me in my leadership sessions that they have so many rules and regulations or that the people above them will not allow them to make changes or they

do not have power to make changes and therefore they do not. Some leaders don't want to 'rock the boat.' Here's a newsflash, the boat has been rocked, tossed and overturned!

I disagree with the individuals that tell me they cannot affect change in their organization. Many people associate change with something that is broad and sweeping across the organization. So, from that perspective, then maybe it is true, they cannot make impactful changes.

However, most leaders can look at their part of the organization and ask themselves what needs to change. My belief is that leaders should focus on making changes in their area of influence. It is impossible to survive tough economic times with our heads buried in the sand or by saying we will just hold on until things get better. Leaders make things better, not wait for times to get better

It takes courage to know that you will be met with opposition all along the way when you want to change something. Therefore, it is important that you believe in what you are doing and have clear expectations. Enlist the help of others to achieve the goals, then they will fuel your courage to keep moving ahead.

**5. Fun:** Yes, FUN!! Now is the time to have an attitude of fun. Despite all the issues and problems that may face an organization, injecting humor and fun can make a big difference. I recall being on a difficult project with fast approaching deadlines and an overstressed team. The stress was taking a toll on both our camaraderie and productivity.

The last thing we would expect a leader to do, is to tell the team to take two hours off and go bowling and have some fun. But that is exactly what this particular leader did. He gathered up the team and the entire group went bowling for just a couple of hours, and did not talk about the project and did not talk about work. The spouses and significant others were invited to join the team.

This outing seemed to allow everyone to become re-energized, renewed and refreshed. Everyone returned to work with a better attitude, problems that had plagued us, now had some breakthrough solutions and the team was in high gear again.

What I have never forgotten after that situation was that when people are working very hard and there is a lot of stress around, we need to create an environment that allows them to decompress. Doing so brings about rejuvenation and increased productivity.

You do not have to take two hours to have fun, but find a way to allow fun in the workplace. Get creative, have other people think of ways that can bring people together. Turn the ordinary into the extraordinary. Have a themed lunch hour, i.e. Luau Thursday and let everyone dress up. (where possible). Turn breaks into something fun, serve refreshments to your staff on a silver platter, or energize meeting by always having a "fun break."

Having fun at work is not a waste of time, it should be thought of as a rejuvenation break for the employees and for the leaders.

You may not be able to control the economy, but you can always control your attitude!

July 14, 2009

©copyrighted Valarie Willis 2008

Contact: [val@valariewillisconsulting.com](mailto:val@valariewillisconsulting.com)

513-677-5637

[www.valariewillisconsulting.com](http://www.valariewillisconsulting.com)