

find many people who don't understand the strategy, aren't vested in bringing it to life, and don't see the importance of *their roles* in executing it.

I enjoy the wit of Yogi Berra: "If you see a fork in the road, take it" and "The future ain't what it used to be." Another one-liner is at the heart of executing strategy: "People will tolerate the conclusions of their leaders, but they will act on their own." *We want to solve our own problems. And we don't want to execute someone else's conclusions.* Bridging this canyon is done by *connecting people to the strategic questions* of the business and *inviting them to make the answers and actions their own.* To be engaged, we must be asked to consider, contrast, and think about solving the puzzles of the business—not simply executing somebody else's answers.

2. Disconnection Canyon. This canyon is formed by the failure to create a *process* that clearly outlines how the strategy will be executed and connects the people to each other in that execution. This illustrates that, without a process, even people who understand and embrace a strategy can't achieve the intended results alone.

Building Bridges with a Process

Leaders need to define and communicate a *common mental model* for the strategy, presenting it as a *shared picture* that means the same thing to everyone.

This is tough for four reasons. First, words are inadequate conveyors of meaning. It's challenging to define *operational excellence, customer delight, brand differentiating, and organic growth* in a way people understand. Second, managers have to receive and send strategic information at the same time. They must interpret the meaning of the strategy and translate it for those they lead in a way that's relevant to them. Third, individual contributors must see the common mental model and have their managers translate it into what they'll have to do (and do differently). Fourth, people need to practice the new skills and behaviors necessary to execute strategy in way that is safe; their "failures" must be designed to build new muscle, not jeopardize their future.

Two things are missing in strategy execution: 1) to be engaged, people want to solve their strategic puzzles; and 2) they must be linked in a process that spells out the roles of leaders, managers, and individual contributors in executing that strategy. LE

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ACTION: Bridge these engagement canyons.

Paradox of Risk

Crisis is a defining moment.



by Howard M. Guttman

SEVERAL NEWS COMMENTATORS have used the phrase *paradox of thrift* to describe consumer behavior during the current downturn. Rather than heading to the malls, consumers are running to banks to make deposits. The paradox: by conserving their assets until rainy days pass, they are prolonging the downpour.

There is a parallel phenomenon in the corporate world. Let's call it the *paradox of risk*. In today's slash-and-burn environment, people tend to head for the storm cellar to ride out events. They avoid risk, don't press the envelope, hesitate to challenge peers or—heaven forbid—the leader. Better to play it safe. Stay in your comfort zone. There's a pervasive sense of *what-am-I-to-do powerlessness* in an economic tsunami.

But it's difficult to build a vibrant, successful organization on fear. The greater the risk aversion, the more likely you'll remain in the storm cellar, and the more likely there won't be much left when you emerge.

Powerful leadership is the best antidote to fear.

During turmoil, high-performance leaders are "no fear" models. They think of themselves as warriors who ask themselves and those around them, "How do we exercise power over, rather than become victims of, circumstance?"

Case in Point

We are working with a senior leader who assumed the top position over a multi-billion-dollar division of a consumer goods company. The company, including this leader's division, has been reorganized. He is a true warrior, and in these tough times he is not just paddling through the status quo. He is carefully considering what needs to change in his unit, treating it as a blank slate, and asking himself and members of his team: "If we were to improve operations, what would it look like? What will move the enterprise forward?"



This leader wants to be seen as a player. It is the best way to motivate his people to think innovatively and take risks. By showing up powerfully, he is encouraging his people to look at the status quo, confront the outstanding issues, and take charge.

Take Four Actions

If you want to avoid the paradox of risk, consider taking these four actions:

- **Check your "stories."** Are you leading from a safety/fear mentality or from one with a bias for action? If the former, change your story to, "I'm expected to lead and add value. Let's move forward."

- **Check your team's "stories."** What preconceived notions are your team members—and those reporting to them—holding onto? If they're hiding in the storm cellar, coach them to come out. And when they do, they need to see a world of opportunity. What will make them powerful is having a story that says, "I can go beyond these circumstances. I can be the master, not the victim, of the situation."

- **Make it safe to take risks.** You don't want to stroke someone for blowing up the family farm. But, if people take a sensible risk and fail, debriefing is better than berating.

- **Create high-performance teams.** This is the best way to extricate you from the risk paradox. It's easier to be rational about taking risks when peers provide one another with feedback, hold one another accountable, and think beyond silos. Open discussion and the free flow of information mitigate risk.

Members of a high-performing team are as pivotal to success as the leader. As the going gets rough, use team members for support. For example, if a fear story creeps back into your thinking, there's no need to internalize your angst. Engage a colleague to move beyond it. And, if you can be doing more to help your organization, ask, "As your leader, am I adding maximum value? Where else can I contribute?"

Crisis is a defining moment for leaders. The media drumbeat of economic bad news gets louder. No doubt much of it is true. But you hold the key to the paradox of risk. You can either hunker down or take bold action. LE

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ACTION: Take bold action.