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ON MANAGEMENT, STRATEGY AND LEADERSHIP

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TIME TO PULL BACK, STICK TO PLANS OR MOVE FORWARD?

We live times of uncertainty; the World Cup, elections, economic imbalances, corruption episodes, lingering effects of the 2008 world financial crisis, haziness in the global political game... What is expected from corporate, government and civil society leaders? And from our citizens?

In times like these we are facing in our country, what should be considered a sound, common sense course of actions? Should we make decisions cautiously, in a conservative stance that aims at protecting what has been achieved so far, ie. pull back a little bit, cut costs, reduce head-count, etc.? Or should we make decisions that stick to already outlined mid-to long-term plans, executing with twice the energy what has already been decided without letting motivation slump, without allowing lack of motivation to prevail within the organization? Or should we rather adopt "strategic common sense" moving forward more boldly than usual and even "go full throttle"?

Perhaps common sense would require consider all of the above and fully assess the three alternatives. Alas our experience in leadership workshops indicates that this is not what happens in most organizations. The debates tend to focus on the needed cuts and only marginally touch on the alternative of sticking to previous plans. Even in the rare event of the latter, the approach is mostly negative, focused on not doing anything and letting inertia prevail. Equally rare is the approach of sticking to plans with a touch of tactical innovations that adjust them to the current situation. Even rarer is the approach of moving forward with even more energy and boldness, in the opposite direction of the majority... And increasing investments when everyone seems to be "disinvesting".

However the rarest of all is a fourth path of courageously disclosing the boundaries of the "working model" to which the organization and its surrounding greater system seem to be tied to. And of using the apparent "crisis" as an opportunity to reinvent the model itself. This by no ways mean throwing up your hands and starting from scratch, a common flimsy criticism from skeptics to rule out this alternative. In truth it means starting the journey towards a very different future that we are able to create - while at the same time seeking to improve what is currently done. This could be done through

prototyping “embryos” of the working model that we believe should prevail in the future.

Would it be possible to embrace all four alternatives? Yes. We should. And all at the same time.

For starters, it is always time to eliminate the unnecessary, the wasted that accumulate due to complacency. To let go of people who shouldn't even be in the organization to begin with. To obliterate what is already obsolete. To restructure for increased productivity and to even exceed world class standards. To take advantage of the rugged moment to "stop" and do some housekeeping.

At the same time, crises can be a good time to dive in a strategic retreat and rethink already established plans, thus creating tactical countermeasures to adjust them to the adverse context. Ideally this has to be done in a participative manner, involving the entire organization and thus creating an important byproduct: a motivational boost for all collaborators and greater engagement during the execution phase of the conceived changes.

In parallel that third alternative can also be implemented: "go full throttle", transcending existing plans and what has already been decided. This requires seeking bolder ideas that exist within the organization and bringing them on to the decision table. Some rhetorical questions could be handy here: what would young start-up entrepreneurs think about what we are doing? What highly unusual and innovative actions would they want to take on into our organization had they the room to do so?

Wouldn’t it be highly likely that these "entrepreneurs" (who probably already are within our own organizations) could help us create "embryos" of new products and services that in the future would become the main working model of our organization? Could we take advantage of these stormy times to reinvent our way of doing things and the very system in which we are embedded into?

In times like these we crisply grasp the difference between leaders (in all levels within our organization) and "managers" of the status quo. The latter are afraid of instability, of uncertainties and of everything that may affect the smoothness of what is already going on.

Leaders, on the other hand, strive to move towards what needs to be built. They consider turbulence, problems, and hurdles just as a part of life, bumps in the road. And they overcome their fears by willpower, moved by noble intentions. By the desire to make a difference.

Above and beyond our corporate roles, we are - first and foremost - citizens. Collectively we build the larger context in which we live. And it is exactly by the effective exercise of full citizenship and search for the common good we become true leaders.

It is time to move forward. Time to breed new things rather than grieve about what we could have reached - as an organization and as a country. Everything has a reason for being. The mistakes we collectively made in the past have taught us to discern functional from dysfunctional behaviors and actions. It is not time to waste energy assigning blame. It is time to anticipate, reform, build and act. Time to make things happen. ■

Shall we – together - turn around the spirit of the times in our organizations and country, by leveraging our strengths and taking full advantage of extraordinary opportunities brought for by these times of change?