Leadership: Agility in the Face of Fragility

Leaders who ignore the fragility of themselves and those with whom they interact may soon realize that complacency leads to anxiety or panic.

By Gerry Riskin

Leaders are aware of the imperative to be agile right now. However, many may have a blind spot and are not conscious of or sensitive to the fact that their constituencies are particularly stressed and fragile.

Experts tell us that:

- Business agility is the ability to adapt quickly to market changes—to respond rapidly and flexibly to customer demands and to adapt and lead change in a productive and cost-effective way without compromising quality, all in order to continuously achieve a competitive advantage.
- Fragility is the quality of being delicate or vulnerable. Because of the pandemic and social unrest, almost all of the people with whom a leader interacts, both internally and externally, are extremely fragile. So are the leaders themselves, whether they are aware of it or not.

At a recent seminar conducted by my friend, the lawyer and PhD psychologist Larry Richard (lawyerbrain.com), he suggested that we lawyers are not the most resilient group in society. In fact, we have a higher need for predictability than most and are vulnerable when confronted by changes, especially if the changes come without warning, result in a significant loss of control, or carry with them the possibility of injury or even death. The pandemic and social unrest tick all the boxes.

Many lawyers, and perhaps especially those in leadership positions, are typically not very closely connected with their feelings. They tend to be highly analytical and rational and are accustomed to detaching from emotion.

So, when I ask legal leaders how things are going, I’ll typically get an answer that’s very self-confident and positive, such as, “I think we’re doing okay and managing things quite well.” It’s not true. That is not to say those leaders are lying to me; they are more likely deceiving themselves and perhaps suppressing their own feelings.

Those leaders are not “okay” if they and those with whom they work are not sleeping as well as they used to and are exhibiting symptoms of anxiety and possibly clinical depression. Asking most leaders how they are doing is too often the equivalent of asking a colorblind person to describe the colors on a painting.

WHY SENSITIVITY TO FRAGILITY IS ESSENTIAL

Imagine for a moment that in your leadership role, you wish to communicate (likely virtually) a message regarding firm strategy with your partners and staff. At the same time, there is a fire near enough every individual in your audience that they can smell smoke but are not sure exactly where the fire is or what is burning. Nonetheless you proceed to deliver your important message.

Will your audience immediately defer their concerns about the smoke and give you their undivided attention? Those few who have rationalized that the smoke is probably emanating from someone’s controlled (safe, clean and legal) fire being used to eliminate some refuse may not be distracted. They may track with your message.
Firm leaders must ensure that everyone in the firm has the appropriate level of awareness of the fragility of those they supervise, as well as clients they serve—and the tools to deal with the fragility they discover. They must take the same approach. Firm leaders must ensure that everyone in the firm has the appropriate level of awareness of the fragility of those they supervise, as well as clients they serve—and the tools to deal with the fragility they discover.

Summary (Requirements of Leaders: Agility in the Face of Fragility)
Our current circumstances magnify what is required of leaders. Good leaders demonstrate care and appreciation for partners, associates and staff, and their families. They train all firm personnel to follow suit with those they supervise and with the clients they serve. And, they remember to contemplate and reach out to referral sources, past clients, prospective clients, other professionals (like accounting firms, etc.) and any others who may be relevant to your particular firm.

There is No Neutral (aka “There’s No Room on the Fence”)
If I ask you about a brand that you are familiar with, chances are you will respond either positively or negatively. Most people have brand preferences. Your firm is a brand. At one end of the curve, clients may be intensely loyal. At the other, they’d leave you for a more appealing competitor if switching weren’t such a hassle. In my survey experience, very few, if any, clients would say, “I don’t have an opinion either positive or negative. I am neutral. I neither like nor dislike my law firm.”

Reflection
As you contemplate this article, you may enjoy listening to “Fragile” by Sting and Stevie Wonder. LP

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