

PERSEVERANCE

The capacity to persevere is one characteristic that sets exceptional leaders apart. Over the life of most organizations there will be challenging issues, changing circumstances, and unforeseen difficulties. (Those are euphemisms for crises, setbacks, and harsh dilemmas.) Although there are certainly times when businesses and organizations experience good fortune and success, most enterprises encounter serious obstacles and risks at one time or another.

So: What is the role of the leader during difficult times? I submit that in order to successfully meet a severely challenging situation, the leader's *essential* task is simply to persevere. Although brilliant strategies and tactics are always extremely useful, the leader's primary responsibility is even more fundamental. The tenacity to keep coming back to the work at hand, back to the present reality, is what's required in the face of daunting circumstances. That means that the right character is more critical than the right strategy.

Over the course of my career as a management consultant, I have witnessed business comebacks from fires, financial crises, and public relations disasters. From these experiences I have identified five components of a leader's ability to persevere.

1. Leaders must have and be able to hold on to their personal visions for the organization. Regardless of how discouraging the current situation may be, exceptional leaders are able to stay connected with their picture of the desired future. They find inspiration for themselves and others by keeping that vision alive and calling it up as often as necessary in order to remind themselves where they are headed and why. Their clarity of vision is like a super magnet that draws them inexorably forward.

2. Leaders must have extraordinary resolve and commitment to that future. This trait goes by many names - fortitude, stamina, and dedication among them. It is the capacity to do everything possible and to resist the temptation to give up.

3. Leaders must have a pragmatic, tempered sense of optimism. Once again, this may be known by many names, such as faith, belief, and self-confidence. Strong leaders have an almost intuitive feel for finding their way through the brambles in their path. They are creative, and able to call on all their skills and senses no matter how trying the circumstances. They are extraordinarily resourceful, constantly finding new approaches, new perspectives, and new insights to apply to the situation.

4. The persevering leader must understand the importance of repetition. This may appear overly simple, but it can mean the difference between surviving or devolving. Just as athletes and musicians must continuously maintain their skills in the fundamentals, the same is true for people in organizations. Oftentimes the work of slogging through difficulties involves a renewed emphasis upon the fundamental, unglamorous and yet essential functions of the enterprise. The effective leader must be willing to let go of the non-essential in order to preserve core functions.

5. Tenacious leaders conserve their personal emotional strength and the emotional resources of others by keeping a cool head. During times of stress, the conservation of energy is critical, and unnecessary drama consumes energy. In an emotionally challenging time, the exceptional leader is able to maintain clarity about how and when to expend precious emotional energy. While emotions are a necessary and useful resource, they are most constructive when expressed with purpose and awareness.

Persevering leaders are often characterized as strong and courageous, for indeed it requires fortitude to carry on in the face of seemingly insoluble dilemmas or overwhelming adversity. And that is

the point. Although the role of leadership requires a broad set of multiple talents and skills, one of the fundamental qualities required for long-term achievement is simply the capacity to continue. One leader I know likes to call it being “consistently persistent.” In times of hardship, the critical task of a leader is often reduced to the most basic level: to simply keep going.

(A tip for follow-up reading: For a riveting and inspirational true story about brilliant leadership throughout an extended set of life and death crises and setbacks, let me suggest *Shackleton’s Way, Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer*, by Margot Morrell and Stephanie Capparell.)

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Mary Luttrell is a Certified Management Consultant and business coach who helps leaders be more effective and their organizations be more successful. Her services include strategic planning, marketing, meeting and retreat facilitation, organizational performance development, and leadership coaching. She has helped hundreds of organizations in her 25 years in business. Contact information: thecoach@sonic.net or (707) 887-2256.