

The Safe versus Real Leader

BY GRAHAM JONES, Ph.D.

We hear a lot about “the new normal” as the world is (hopefully!) climbing out of the global economic debacle, but what does “new normal” actually mean?

At the microlevel, there is no precise detail that can be offered by the “experts” because they are largely confined to educated guesswork based on experiences that sometimes bare only a passing resemblance to what the world is experiencing right now. At a macrolevel, the current business world has an uncanny resemblance to another world I know so well.

As a sports psychologist consulting with Olympic and World Champion athletes, I spent most of my time helping them deal with the uncertainty, unpredictability, and intense pressure that are their world. My work with these athletes has led me to identify three critical rules of acting, focusing, and thinking (CRAFT), the essence of which is highlighted below. These serve them so well in navigating their sometimes hostile environment to deliver high performance that is sustainable. They are:

CRAFT 1—Focus on the things that *really* matter

CRAFT 2—Take nothing for granted

CRAFT 3—Love the pressure

We can all learn from these elite athletes and my experience of consulting in commercial organizations is that these three CRAFT have become especially significant to performers in the “new normal” business world.

This article examines the implications of the “new normal” for leaders and leadership. It distinguishes between *real* and *safe* leaders and how the three CRAFT underpin the real leadership required.

THE “NEW NORMAL” WILL NOT TOLERATE LEADERS WHO PLAY IT SAFE

ING CEO Arkadi Kuhlmann got it exactly right when he said, “The challenge for companies today is to avoid the instinct to stay conservative, hunker down, and be safe” (*MWorld*, Winter

2009, p. 8). But how many leaders are willing to step up to the plate and out of their safety zone?

The current economic difficulties have backed most leaders into a corner where they are forced to focus almost exclusively on the numbers and nothing else. But is this any more than merely an easy and convenient excuse for playing it safe?

Sadly, the answer is “yes” in the case of those organizations where there is a preponderance of what I call *safe* leaders. These are the leaders who perpetuate the status quo and thus hinder progress and innovation. Their primary motives are job security and keeping out of the firing line. Far from adhering to the three CRAFT that will help them, their focus is on the pitfalls of their decisions, actions, and risks that are threats to their position. These leaders are surprised by the unexpected so that their actions become controlled by the environment and they are forever fighting fires. *Safe* leaders also resent the pressure they are under—this is not what they signed up for. However, in the “new normal” there is no hiding place for *these* safe leaders—they will be exposed for what they are.

THE “NEW NORMAL” REQUIRES REAL LEADERS

Real leaders are very different from *safe* leaders. These are the leaders whose motives are much more about doing what is right for the organization and its people than protecting their own interests. They are very good at all three CRAFT.

CRAFT 1: Focus on the Things That Really Matter

The “new normal” demands *real* leaders who focus on spotting and seizing any opportunity that will gain or maintain competitive advantage. This requires them to focus on much more than just the numbers if they are to find them. They must focus instead on the things that *really* matter, and not the things they feel comfortable or safe focusing on, or the uncontrollables, or being a victim of the economic difficulties.

They know the things that *really* matter are those opportunities that will make a difference, not all of which are in the external marketplace. Some may be under the very noses of leaders—so close that they cannot see them! These are the internal change management initiatives that will drive the externally facing innovation that the “new normal” demands.

By focusing on the things that *really* matter, and not getting distracted by all the uncontrollables, *real* leaders ensure their limited capacity focus is put to good use. They are able to manage the tension arising from their responsibility to ensure the future health of the organization while at the same time delivering short-term performance.

CRAFT 2: Take Nothing for Granted

Nothing can be taken for granted in the “new normal.” Real leaders are especially careful not to take their people’s commitment, loyalty, and engagement for granted. They know that no

matter how good a job they do as a leader, there will always be some people who are disgruntled and disengaged. They devote time and energy to listening to their people's views and showing genuine empathy because they know this is more important than ever before.

Real leaders know that high-performing organizations are continually changing—they can never stand still—and this will become an even bigger contributor to organizations' success and survival as the “new normal” continues to unfold. Whether it is driving internal change aimed at sustaining and enhancing employee engagement, or the continual innovation required to maintain and gain competitive advantage in the marketplace, real leaders strive to stay ahead of the game. This process involves planning the what-if scenarios so that they cater for as many surprises as possible. These leaders expect the unexpected and are ready for it.

CRAFT 3: Love the Pressure

The “new normal” performance demanded from organizations, teams, and individuals is more visible than ever before. Even more demanding is the expectation to achieve more with less. *Real* leaders must challenge their people to deliver their best and wipe out any complacency. Above all, leaders must challenge everyone to raise their own personal bars. This starts with themselves—leaders must role model the high standards they expect.

The pressure that comes with the “new normal” requires not only adaptability but the ability to thrive on it, and even love it. Merely coping with pressure will not deliver the results the “new normal” demands. *Real* leaders need to be mentally tough so that they can thrive and create the conditions for their people to also thrive. This mental toughness also involves an ability to maintain self-belief when times get especially tough and inevitable setbacks test leaders' inner strength. Loving pressure is much easier when leaders believe in themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

The “new normal” requires leaders with the courage and desire to be real. If organizations are to thrive at one end of the spectrum and survive at the other, then they must recruit and promote leaders who possess the three leadership CRAFT: leaders who can identify and then focus on the things that *really* matter; who take nothing for granted and possess the flexibility and adaptability to prepare them for the unexpected; and who are able, or can learn, to love the pressure. Organizations who cannot find these leaders had better train and equip their current incumbents before it is too late! MW

Graham Jones, Ph.D., is director of Lane4 Management Group, a performance development consultancy, based in Princeton, New Jersey. He is the author of Thrive on Pressure: Lead and Succeed When Times Get Tough, published by McGraw-Hill in August 2010. For more information, visit his website and blog at www.sustainedhighperformance.com. For information on Lane4, visit: www.lane4performance.com