LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: LEADING IN THE AGE OF PRESIDENT TRUMP

A few clients have been asking how to handle the widening tensions of the current political divide. One asked, "What do I do when it is clear that those on one side of the table are Democrats and those on the other side are Republicans. They all work for this organization."

Another client told me, "I bring together executives from Canada, Mexico, and the USA.   They all have comments about the current administration that go well beyond its impact on our organization. Inappropriate comments are made."

Several clients have expressed concern about board room discussions regarding #MeToo, Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and other topics that dominate the 24-hour news cycle. They are not sure how to best handle these divisive issues.

The EXCN message tends to be simple. This is what we have found to be effective: Keep your vision and mission in front of you at all times. Lead with your values. Avoid confronting opinions that do not affect the business. And, whenever possible, take a position. For example, the former CEO of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, has taken stands on many controversial issues including, gay rights, race relations, and immigration. Each time, there is backlash and, yet, Starbucks continues to grow revenue and provide investors with outstanding returns.

Whether leaders lean right, left, or are in the middle, many are having similar problems these days: the political landscape in the USA is leaking into C-suite meetings and causing tension when left unchecked and underled. Leaders are having to engage at a level that might be unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

A Call to Action for Leadership

- *Articulate, discuss, and "live" the Values.* Review your Values. Translate them into behaviors for all. Be very vocal and interactive about this; make this a dialogue. Stress the importance of adherence to your Values; you may even want to say that living the Values is more important than ever, despite the fact that living the Values is always important. The point is that external pressures can put additional stressors on your Values system. Make sure it is strong. This is for the greater good, in the organizational sense, and beyond. Hold leadership accountable to live the Values. Make it safe to talk about differences of opinion and ensure all leaders engage in behavior that supports the organization's Values. That alignment will create trust, accountability, and results.

- *Remind people about your organizational vision.* Enroll people in deciding if it is still relevant. Talk about what it will take to achieve it (unity of purpose would be one item) and talk about what could derail it (like divisiveness).

- *Focus on your strategy.* Is it still relevant? Does everybody know what it is and what their role is in achieving it? Now might be a good time to have those conversations.

- *Focus on your goals.* Remind people that all goals, particularly goals shared across the organization, are still important and the expectation is that they will be, at least, reached, if not exceeded. You get what you pay for. Be sure that goals are not strictly siloed but are holistic.

- *Re-introduce your organization-wide code of conduct.* This is "pay to play." More accurately, it is "obey to play" (i.e., remain employed).

- *Review team code of conduct, or team agreements or guidelines.* Whatever you call your terms of engagement as a senior team, it is likely that these may need an update now. Some teams might elect to make certain topics taboo in the team meeting. Other teams might decide that certain topics should be approached individually with the head of the organization and, if a response is necessary to something going on outside the organization, e.g., a change in strategy, that this is negotiated in a creative and civil manner. There are numerous ways to set a behavioral boundary around discussions of political differences.

Have you been seeing any new issues in your organization as a result of political differences? What behavioral boundaries are appropriate for your team/organization?