

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: DEALING WITH EXECUTIVE AMBIGUITY

We are all aware of the leadership maxims that leaders are meant to shine the light of understanding where there is murkiness, deliver clear mandates and expectations, and set the vision and direction. Well, what happens when leaders—you—don't have that clarity and conviction for the time being or for a certain situation?

As leaders, we often feel we need to have the answer. We are not supposed to be confused, but sometimes we are. While ambiguity and indecision about anything can be useful for some period of time, it is not healthy if protracted. We recognize that you, as a leader, cannot afford to stay in that state very long.

So what do you do, when you are at a crossroads and unable to see with absolute clarity which is the right road to follow? What do great leaders do?

Here are some suggestions.

- **Admit you do not know and ask for help.** Say to your team, "I am struggling with the decision around acquiring XYZ Corporation," for example. "What are your views?" Having that humility and revealing it to others takes a great deal of courage when you are a senior leader. People like to offer help to others, whether that person is a Board member, a boss, peer, or a direct report.
- **Involve your team in the solution.** This accomplishes several things: creative thinking from multiple sources and disciplines, and buy-in are chief among those benefits achieved. After all is said and done, implementation is required. An involved team will be supportive and do the heavy lifting.
- **Anticipate the consequences.** Evaluate the options and the chances of achieving potential outcomes with your team. Think about the impact on all stakeholders—you can do this exercise without involving the team. However, if you are playing out what-if scenarios, having people who view those scenarios with different orientations is helpful. And don't forget personal self-care and care for others. How will you be affected, taking one route or another? What effect will there be on your team, customers, investors? Don't forget about your personal time... your family... your lifestyle and health.
- **Integrate your values into your thinking.** This brings us to a significant point. There is a reason you have Core Company Values. They are tools that help clarify decisions that are in the best interest of the company. Lean on them. Use them in the dialogue with the team. Look at them and see how they support your thinking. Remember as a leader your ability to walk the talk is essential to your company's future. *Harvard Business Review* detailed a great example of this in an April 2015 article: [SC Johnson's CEO on Doing the Right Thing, Even When It Hurts Business](#) - about SC Johnson removing certain chemicals from Saran Wrap™ to follow its core values... knowing it would cause a negative impact to the bottom line... because it was the right thing to do.

- **Keep the team in the loop.** As your thinking begins to become clear, it is important to tell the team. There can be a lot of frustration among team members when leaders act like they don't know or they don't have a point of view, when they really do.

Have you felt unclear about what course to take—that tug-of-war between what you don't know and what you think you are supposed to know? Are you coming to a future crossroads that you are uncertain about? Which of these recommendations might help you?