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Got Growth

No leader is master of everything

Key is knowing when to seek input to avoid making bad decisions

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Hu•bris (hyü-bris) n. excessive pride or self-confidence; arrogance

Business leaders often find themselves in situations where they are expected to do things they have little knowledge of or experience with. With the multitude of things that can occur in business, it is unreasonable to assume anyone can be well prepared for every situation.

Just in the past few months, some of the brightest minds in the world have struggled to find solutions to the current economic crises. Jumping from inflationary fears to deflationary worries, our leaders are dealing with hard issues such as availability of funds, as well as soft issues such as fear and emotion.

While they could have avoided the problems, or at least been better at anticipating them, how could anyone have been properly prepared for the size and scope of this crisis?

The Pressure to Perform

Leading an organization requires many skills and strong emotional intelligence; it is not for the faint of heart. Scarred and battle-weary, you press on toward that ultimate goal of growing revenue and increasing profit. You invest your blood, sweat and tears into your organization and employees day after day only to be challenged with a never-ending stream of new situations and circumstances.

Because of the rules by which business is conducted today, leaders find themselves in situations where they are regularly asked to make choices based on experience and knowledge, and expected to execute those decisions with confidence and strength, even

though experience and knowledge might be nonexistent. All too often the pressure to perform can get the best of them, creating situations where they don't use the proper amount of caution or concern. Just as failure to act can be costly, so can the failure to be adequately cautious.

As a leader, your job is to create alignment in your organization, and keep everyone working together as a team toward common goals. Unfortunately, you are also expected to be strategic, constantly checking the horizon for what's to come; anticipating your next move in the game of business and looking for competitive advantages that will provide great returns.

With the daily pressure to perform as the resident expert, leaders often fall prey to certain harmful behaviors. When leaders are under the kind of constant pressure economic downturns can create, it should not be a surprise when a leader succumbs to hubris.

All too often leaders will avoid the necessary due diligence and make bad decisions simply because they are unwilling or unable to say they just don't know. This is when the real danger is at its peak — when the greatest damage can occur.

Once a poor decision has been made, it is much more difficult to admit the mistake after the situation has become public. Often those leaders who have been consumed with hubris will not admit their error and take appropriate action. Rather, they will continue to make poor decisions that often make a bad situation worse.

Escape from the Hamster's Wheel

Step 1: As they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, the first step toward fixing the problem is recognizing that it exists. You must understand what is and is not expected of you by your stakeholders, and believe that no mere mortal has all the wisdom and intelligence to solve every problem on his own.

Part of leadership is knowing when you don't have an answer and finding ways to get the information you need to make an intelligent decision.

Step 2: Talk to your leadership team and ask them for advice. Allowing others to participate in critical conversations is a sign of strength, not weakness. As the leader of your organization, asking for input does not automatically relieve you of your authority or your responsibilities. On the other hand, it does demonstrate a certain confidence in your management team and helps bring alternative viewpoints into your research and evaluation process.

Just because you ask for input does not mean you have to follow everything you will be told. The best ideas usually spring from a combination of two or more creative, sometimes silly, ideas you might not have thought of on your own.

Step 3: One piece of advice commonly offered by consultants is to find someone that has dealt with what you are dealing with and ask their advice. While no one person is likely to have all the answers, there are certainly a many people who have gone through whatever problem you are going through and would gladly help you with it.

Asking for outside help is not a sign of weakness or vulnerability; it is a sign of strength and wisdom.

Step 4: Slow down the process. Seconds, minutes, often hours will not make the difference between failure and success regardless of how certain you are that a decision must be made. And if time is that critical, sometimes it is better to just wait and prepare for the consequences rather than take action that might make those consequences worse.

Unlike the common planning adage, failure to act does not constitute acting to fail.

As a leader, you must recognize that there is no such thing as perfection, and mistakes will be made by you and your staff. So long as you get most of the decisions right most of the time, you are probably ahead of the game. When the stakes get higher, it is time to eliminate emotion from your thoughts and rely on facts, logic and probability, things that often escape us when we are acting under pressure.

We need to be careful and think about what we are doing, particularly when we find ourselves in situations where our experience and knowledge is not as deep as we want it to be. That is no reason to act irrationally, emotionally or with hubris.

I remember the time when playing Trivial Pursuit with my wife and she was 100 percent confident of her answer. Those on her team (I was on a different team) let her respond only to find she was wrong. When questioned how she could have had so much confidence in her answer, she replied, "I was bluffing." Don't put yourself in a position where you are forced to bluff.

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