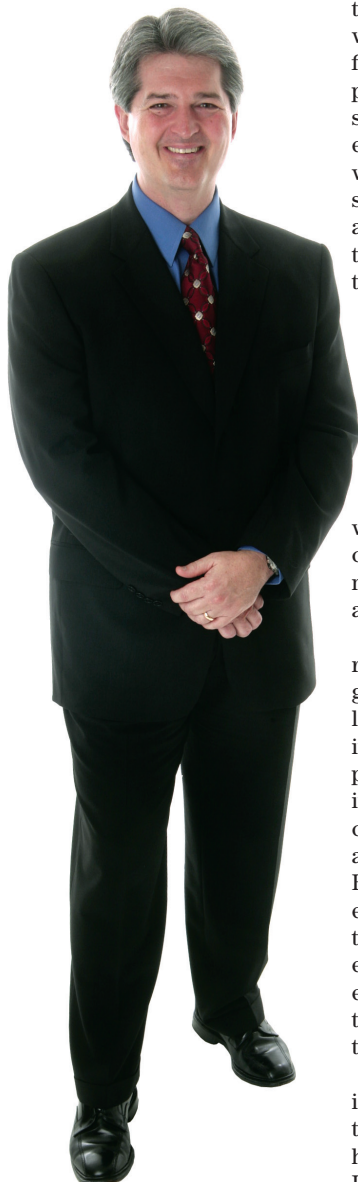


Build solid ground

THREE PRACTICES THAT WILL INSPIRE YOUR TEAM IN CHALLENGING TIMES



“It’s so frightening,” said Kim, one of my coaching clients during our weekly call. “We all know that the company is struggling and that others in our industry have already conducted layoffs, but no one will tell us the truth. It feels like we just don’t matter and that any minute the ground could fall out from under us.”

Like many today, Kim’s company was in a challenging time. Because the company was privately held, very little financial information was publicly available, and the senior executives were being extremely cautious about what they shared. While this strategy was likely designed to avoid creating fear and uncertainty, it was actually having the opposite effect.

Kim and the other leaders at her level were beginning to panic. Not only did they fear losing their jobs, they also interpreted the lack of communication as a sign that they were no longer trusted. Sadly, at the precise moment when their loyalty and their commitment were needed most, the company was literally driving them away.

Even more importantly, the ripple effect of their disengagement was spreading like wildfire. Not only was it affecting the morale and productivity of the employees, it was also undermining the company’s outward reputation and brand with its customers. Before long, these internal and external forces would create the very outcome the senior executives feared: an accelerating downward trajectory that would feed on itself — a true death spiral.

The real tragedy in this story is that the senior leaders of the company could easily have had the opposite effect. Instead of creating an environ-

ment of fear, they could have built the solid ground of trust and loyalty, no matter what financial challenges they faced.

Build solid ground by talking straight.

As a leader, it’s tempting to withhold bad news. You worry about how your team will react and about the fear and lost productivity it will create. But the reality is that by withholding information, you actually make things worse, not better.

Like seismic sensors, people quickly detect the subtle warnings of an impending quake, especially in challenging times. They know there are more closed-door meetings, urgent analysis requests and worried looks, and when you withhold information or try to maintain a false image of normalcy, you lose your most valuable asset: your employees’ trust.

The loss of trust is what escalates a business challenge into a personal crisis for those you lead.

Be honest, no matter what the challenge. State the facts as clearly and simply as you can without being overly optimistic or needlessly pessimistic. Be willing to answer questions often and to say that you don’t always have all the answers. These simple practices will not only affirm that you can be trusted, they will inspire your team to help you meet the challenges you face.

Build solid ground by being loyal.

In difficult times, relationships are tested. People

who have been allies and even friends may be seen by the company as part of the problem rather than the solution. When this happens, you may feel the desire to distance yourself from them, hoping that their perceived weaknesses will not also be projected on you by association.

Instead, remain loyal to the people who work for you and always speak about them in the same way you would if they were present. Offer to help them and support them through your candid feedback, even if you must ultimately make a difficult decision. When you do, you not only teach everyone else that they will be treated with the same respect, you create a team that is equally loyal to you.

Build solid ground by producing results.

Producing results is ultimately the greatest job security. But the surest way to deliver nothing is to focus on everything. When you’re facing a big challenge, you can drive your team to attack everything as a top priority and, in the process, ensure that nothing will be given the focus needed for exceptional results.

Instead, narrow your focus to the one or two priorities that are truly most important and make sure you and your team deliver. Exceptional results on a few important projects will be far more important than a chaotic scramble to work on everything. <<

JIM HULING is an executive consultant, a national keynote speaker and a professional coach. His leadership experience spans more than 30 years, including a decade as CEO of a company recognized four times as one of the “25 Best Companies to Work For in America.” Jim is also the author of “Choose Your Life! a powerful proven method for creating the life you want.” He can be reached at jim@jimhuling.com.