

A Leadership Covenant

What's Needed in These Strained Times?

by Jon Craighead

My passion for effective leadership has me love to use current circumstances as lessons for the advancement of leadership excellence. Two recent events brought the subject to mind. The first was a quote from an unidentified author, which I've termed a covenant: *"Leaders are the custodians of our most precious assets – our businesses and our workforce. It is imperative that leaders are keenly aware their role is a privileged position based on trust and possibility."* Second was the recent NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll on the current mood of the general U.S. population regarding our leaders in congress and the administration. These were their findings: 93% say too much partisan infighting; 84% say special interests have too much influence; 70% say the government is not working; 61% say the political parties aren't willing to compromise; and 58% say the country is headed in the wrong direction. The message to America's leadership is: "We hate what's going on in Washington."

In his book Stewardship, Peter Block writes, "Organizations and leaders who practice stewardship will succeed in the nation and the marketplace by choosing service over self interest." He continues: "Without this, little change will result. Individuals who see themselves as stewards will choose responsibility over entitlement and hold themselves accountable to those over whom they exercise power."

There are several philosophical ways that one can live one's life. More often than not, life gives us circumstances that are beyond our control. The power that we have lies in the nature of our relationship to such circumstances. One option is to be a victim of life – to experience matters as beyond our control and there is little or nothing that can be done. Another method is to assume full responsibility and ownership of the circumstances with a commitment to alter them to fit our intentions. The difference in the two approaches is the latter provides a more empowering life.

Being answerable for one's actions is essential to bringing integrity to the responsibility domain. Holding ourselves accountable and having others be accountable for their actions create a high level of integrity. It has one see the essential contribution one possesses and allows people to pursue excellence for the nation, their organizations, and themselves. The result is an opening to the next level of competency.

As business leaders, by committing to focusing primarily on the needs of the marketplace, we develop a keener awareness of what our customers need to get their job done. This allows us to shift the focus from profitability to service. Nathan Washburn, in an article titled “Why Profit Shouldn’t Be Your Top Goal” in the September 2009 Harvard Business Review, wrote: *“For decades executives have made maximizing shareholders’ value their top priority. But evidence suggests that shareholders actually do better when firms put their customer first.”* Conversely, as customers we owe it to ourselves and our vendors to accept nothing less than an excellent product. I know there are times when I would prefer to not rankle feathers and go quietly into the night – never to return. But such action is a disservice to the vendor who has no idea of your displeasure and therefore is unable to make the correction and/or take action to repair trust.

There are a couple of ways to respond and react to the NBC/WSJ poll. One would be to take the ostrich approach: ignore the message and hope that over time the sting will diminish and we’ll once again operate in a business-as-usual environment. Another way would be to listen to the dissatisfaction, and then take a personal inventory by taking stock of ourselves first. Once this is accomplished we can create the appropriate pathway to interrupt the trend and redirect the flow. To address such monumental issues will take more than individual effort. It will take creating new partnerships, or most certainly reforming existing partnerships, to bring about the needed change. Most importantly it will take all of us working together in new creative ways of formulating the people and actions necessary to impact the current thinking.

One great advantage we have going for us is our history of rising together to meet the call-to-arms to deal with seemingly overwhelming circumstances – we’ve done it before and we can do it again. We’ll need to put aside our perceived differences and rally around our commonality if we are to pull through this mess and bring creative new solutions to the issues we’re confronting. This not a time to stand on the sidelines pointing fingers at each other and being right about our individual views. To do so will sink the ship and we all go down together.

I’ll end with a quote from Richard Leider, founder of the Inventure Group: “Choosing to both save and savor life opens the possibility for more authenticity, wholeheartedness, and the propensity for true joy.”