Hope, The New Leadership Competency

By David A. O'Brien, WorkChoice Solutions

With performance review season about to get under way in many organizations, countless conversations will be focused on leadership competencies. Despite a wide range of universal competencies that drive leadership success, few of these conversations will include a measure of the leader's capacity to build hope. To be sure, competencies like visioning, execution, resource management and the full list of EI related competencies (to name a few) remain critical measures of leadership impact. What's changed however is that today's workforce is overworked and overstressed to a point where hope has been replaced by uncertainty and fear in many organizations.

As a beginning point, it's helpful to consider what *hope* as a leadership competency involves. At a foundational level, hope is the absence of fear. It is the belief that the future (even tomorrow) offers an improved state of well-being. At another level, hope is the belief that the positive outweighs the negative. Within the context of work, it means that despite our daily challenges, we're going in the right direction and we'll be okay or even better off when we get to where we're going. Herein resides one of the greatest opportunities available to leaders today. Namely, the opportunity to build hope not just as an antidote for fear but even more importantly, as a building block of community, resilience and engagement.

With very few exceptions, employees at every level are subjected to the rumor mill and all of its toxic, fear inducing half-truths. In 25 years of exploring this organizational phenomenon, I have never uncovered a positive or inspiring story that was spun in the rumor mill of organizations large or small. All too often these stories serve to erode trust, collaboration, accountability and of course, hope too.

Several years ago, I introduced the "*good news deficit*" concept as a way of not only helping to manage the rumor mill but also to help gauge the ratio of good news to bad news that employees are exposed to. Although quite simple, the concept and related test received kind feedback from leaders far and wide. In addition to validating my belief that the rumor mill was a very real impediment to morale and engagement, the feedback confirmed that the good news deficit was growing.

Take the good news deficit test in your world of work. Simply assess the ratio of organization specific good news to bad news (rumor mill included) that your employees hear or read in the span of one week. More than likely, the good news deficit in your organization is growing too. Creating hope involves more than this but it's an important consideration as you guide your team through and beyond the challenges of today's workplace.

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Napoleon Bonaparte once said that "true leaders are dispensers of hope" Clearly, if there was ever a time when your team needed hope it's now. In fact it's probably safe to say that your team is hungry for hope. While there is no single, magic formula for helping teams to move from fear to hope, there is a wide range of leadership strategies that aid in this process. What follows are some leadership actions worth considering.

10 More Things You Can Do Now:

1. Invest the time to assess the good news deficit in your organization to help gauge the ratio of good news to bad news that employees are exposed to on a weekly basis. Also consider what impact this ratio has on team morale and engagement.

2. Seek feedback from your team and peer group about the good news deficit at your organization and encourage everyone to share ideas on how to reduce or eliminate the deficit across your organization. Also assess the range and scope of your organization's rumor mill to help identify themes that may need to be addressed in a proactive manner.

3. Initiate a conversation with your leadership peer group to explore each leader's role and strategy for communicating a consistent leadership message within a predefined schedule or sequence.

4. Assess the frequency and content of your own leadership communications and consider what impact they have on creating hope for your team.

5. Challenge yourself and others to uncover and celebrate positive outcomes and team wins however small.

6. Consider doing a weekly "round-up" or summary of organizational and team successes that serve to remind everyone of what is working well.

7. Stay connected to your team. Despite having to juggle more priorities than ever before, your team still needs you to be there for them. Schedule 20 minutes of Leadership By Walking Around (LBWA) time on your calendar every week to let your team know that you're there for them and that you care about how they're doing.

8. Look for opportunities to reinforce your vison of the future and how it creates an improved state of well-being for all stakeholders.

9. Resist the urge to allow daily pressures or small setbacks to put you in the fear mode.

10. Remember, your leadership influence is huge and you set the tone. If you project a sense of hope, your team is likely to do the same.

About David A. O'Brien

David is President of CT based WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness training, coaching and consulting services that was founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate, nonprofit and public sector clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His second book, *The Navigator's Compass, 101 Steps Toward Leadership Excellence* will be released in the fall of 2014. To learn more about the scope of David's work in helping leaders and teams to be more effective or to arrange for David to speak at your next conference or other special event, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at: **www.workchoicesolutions.com** or call him directly at 860.242.1070.