

Coaching high achievers

Corporate Turbulence

Corporate Turbulence is defined as that time in the life of a Company (or Subsidiary or Division), when everyone in that organisation – from top to bottom – feels that their jobs and careers are at risk. In effect, Corporate Turbulence is the result of the turbulence felt by all of the individuals in that organisation.

The Causes

Corporate Turbulence is created by the insecurities of potential change, which, in its turn, is prompted by a variety of factors, sometimes external, sometimes internal and often both. Typical external causes include:

- *Rumour of being sold, acquired, merged, 'downsized', etc.*
- *Actually being sold*
- *Being the subject of a bid*
- *Being told formally that the Company, Subsidiary, Division is to be put up for sale*
- *Seeing the market turn against the company with margins reducing, market share being eroded and losses being made.*

Internal causes might typically include:

- *New Chief Executive of the Company*
- *New Chief Executive of the Parent Company*
- *A Director unexpectedly taking 'early retirement'*
- *The new computer system being thrown out*
- *Rumours of redundancies.*

And there are many more – in both categories.

There may be very good, positive reasons for the change, but a worried organisation actually expects bad news. That is simply the reality with which the company has to cope.

The Effect

So, what's the effect of the Turbulence?

In extremes, either panic or paralysis. But leaving aside the extremes, the likely effect is a lack of focus – a loss of concentration on the job at all levels. This could mean reduced productivity, lost orders, accidents, mistakes and an increase in absenteeism, lateness, customer complaints and counter-productive, time-wasting conversations.

All of this happens just at a time when the organisation actually needs people to be more focused, more productive and more committed. There will certainly be some people – probably the 'better' people in the organisation, those with greater leadership qualities and a greater ability to find employment elsewhere – who will begin to 'dust off' their CV's, call the headhunters, and scan the job pages with greater care and interest!!

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Rumours will abound and the belief about what the future holds for the organisation will get ever more bleak, because that's the nature of 'the informal grapevine'.

The Solution

The best solution would be a quiet, clear, unambiguous and truthful message that all is going to be fine, and that things could be even better than before the 'happening' took place. If only life were that simple! It's a reality of corporate life that there will be a period of uncertainty before any clarity emerges. This remains the case whether the eventual 'clarity' represents good news or bad news.

What's needed, therefore, is a reliable way of reducing the level of turbulence. In our view this can best be done by word of mouth from the key people in the organisation.

That, however, is easier said than done! Those influential 'key people' see themselves as being at risk along with everyone else, and can be just as anxious.

So, who are these people?

Invariably, they are the senior people: the Board, the Executive Committee or equivalent, plus perhaps a few additional senior people who are respected by the staff.

However, they can only communicate effectively if they have had their own level of uncertainty and turbulence reduced. A simple statement to these people along the lines of 'You'll be OK, don't worry' may not be possible and, even if it is, may not be believable.

How can an organisation help these key people reduce their own turbulence and increase their ability to handle their own stressful situation? This achieved, they will be much better able to communicate effectively with staff and help to steady the ship.

We're looking for a process that will enable these key individuals to feel more in control of their own destiny, and more confident that, come what may, they will be able to continue striving for their own career goals.

Coaching

A solution is coaching: support and guidance from somebody knowledgeable and experienced, who is not involved and is therefore clearly capable of objective assessment of their position. This definition almost certainly points to an individual who is external to the organisation, and who can fulfil the role of coach to help reduce turbulence at senior level.

It is the coach's job to work with the key individuals to answer the questions they will be posing for themselves, and perhaps to ask some questions they hadn't thought of. This process will reduce uncertainty, provide focus and release energy to get done whatever's necessary. Perhaps more than anything else, a coach can help the individuals involved feel that they have regained a measure of control in a situation in which, all too often, executives feel themselves to be out of control.

So, what will the coach do? Firstly, he or she will ask each executive to talk through their concerns, fears, hopes and expectations. That in itself will relieve some of their stress. Then the coach will discuss the current situation, and try to identify the two or three most likely outcomes. Having done that, they – coach and executive together – will check out how each scenario could impact the individual's own career plan.

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Let's take one example:

John Smith has been promoted to be the Marketing Director in a division of a multi-national company. He has been in post for a year and has successfully dealt with the pressure of his promotion and putting in place a new marketing strategy.

At this point a new CEO is appointed to the parent company. He makes it clear that he will be reviewing the corporate strategy of the company and that he believes there are too many divisions. The outcome of that strategy review will be announced in three months' time.

The company needs John to be focused 100% on meeting the ever-increasing demands of the job. John also needs to be focused on the job. However, he is suffering from 'Career Turbulence'. Inevitably some, perhaps a lot, of his emotional energy is being drained away from the job and into an attempt to deal with the turbulence. What does he do? Does he up-date his CV? Should he call the head-hunters he knows? Should he check out the FT and The Times job ads? Should he just keep his head down? Should he discuss things with his boss? Or with the HR Director? Who should he be making his mark with in the new hierarchy? How should he do that? What are his colleagues doing? And so on.

There is, of course, no simple answer. However, it's very much in the interests of the new company to reduce the uncertainties as much as possible. If they can demonstrate an understanding of the turbulence created and its effect on John – and his colleagues, they will release much more of their energy toward focusing on the job.

So the coach gives John an opportunity to talk through his concerns and emotions regarding the situation. Then they discuss the likely future for the Group. As the new CEO has a good reputation for growing businesses, and there is inherent strength within the Group, they conclude it's in John's best interests to take whatever actions are available to him to further his career within the Group.

However, it also makes sense to accept the possibility that John might decide to leave, or might be terminated once the new strategy is implemented.

The actions agreed for John are:

1. *Speak to his boss to make it clear that he is excited by the potential for growth.*
2. *Make an appointment with the Group HR Director to pass on the same message.*
3. *Formulate ideas for the growth of his division, with and without it being merged with the one other division that looks a likely partner, and find the "right time" to pass on those ideas to his MD, and if possible the new CEO or someone close to him*
4. *Update his CV to include his achievements over the past 12 months and "dust off" his head-hunter list. But do nothing. In practice, making himself ready to look outside the Group, but not actioning anything reduces John's stress level.*

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Hence, the benefits to the company of coaching are:

- *An executive better able to focus on the job.*
- *An executive better able to have a realistic view of what the situation could mean to him, i.e. reduced career turbulence.*
- *An executive feeling more cared for by his bosses, and hence more likely to be motivated to work positively with them.*

The benefits to John Smith are just as powerful

- *He can clear his mind of unnecessary uncertainty, and concentrate on the job.*
- *He can put himself in a position to take advantage of the opportunities that turbulence always creates.*

I believe that Corporate Turbulence is a phenomenon which is happening more and more often, that it's enormously costly to the organisation, and that the benefits of minimising it are significant. At Pitkeathley & Partners we believe that coaching can be a powerful antidote.

Bill Pitkeathley