

## You can weather this storm

*Company leaders must project a positive attitude*

**Y**ears ago (circa 1991), an acquaintance of mine who was a Wisconsin-based Chicago business owner and won a significant battle against cancer decided to fulfill a dream of a lifetime. He wanted to build a sailboat, and with his wife and friends along the way, sail the world.

He did it when our country was coming out of a recession and his company had just gone public. He decided to go ahead with the worldwide trip because, "my employees were behind it and we were on top of our game."

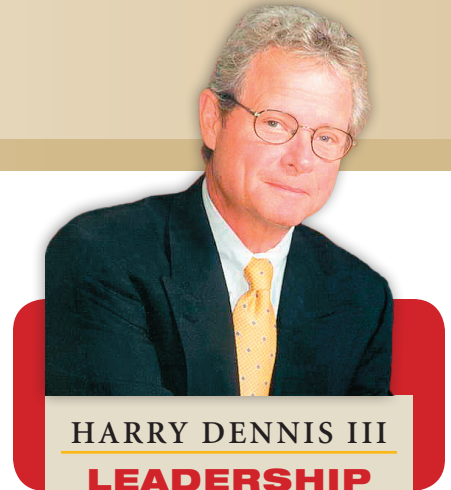
His trip began in the Netherlands. Halfway across the Atlantic, en route to Cape Horn, he and his volunteer crew encountered a near perfect storm. He kept his U.S. friends informed via satellite communication. They made the crossing, nearly capsizing two or three times. But they made it.

The 10 things he learned from the trip were noted recently by TEC/Vistage speaker Marcus Child from the United Kingdom. Good stuff to consider in our current economic storm:

- 1. Be positive.** As leaders, how we look each day, day-in and day-out, leaves a firm impression on our employees. If we are negative and down one day and up the next, it leaves a confusing message.
- 2. Walk and talk the positive in your company.** The media, we all know, feast on the negative. Just look at the Janesville situation with GM. But many small businesses in our great state are flourishing – we can testify to this with our 650 Wisconsin TEC members. Few are seeing a major turn down. So concentrate on the

good things that are happening in your business.

- 3. Simplify business goals into your absolute highest customer priorities.** My sailing acquaintance made sure that everyone knew their specific roles and priorities and were executing appropriately. At interim destination stops, he booted those people who couldn't handle it.
- 4. Set weekly "win-win" objectives to support your high customer priorities.** Then celebrate their accomplishment with all employees. They don't have to be big.
- 5. Be really visible.** Meet with employees who need you, but use your communication tools, email, phone, fax, to stay in touch. Keep focusing on the good stuff going on in your business. Treat the negatives as an opportunity to overcome.
- 6. Take advantage of informal employee encounters.** For example, if you're walking out to the parking lot after work and you bump into an employee leaving at the same time, take the time to stop and ask her how she's doing. Talk to her about your optimism regarding the company going forward.
- 7. Tell the truth.** All the pundits are saying we "ain't seen nothing yet" and that the next two years are going to be strenuous at best for our economy. So? Everyone is going to be in this macro-economic boat, but the smart guys will prosper. Communicate the fact that your company will be among the smart guys.
- 8. Key people need to be on the same page.** We all know this. But to be on



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the same page, everyone needs to talk together as a group at least and talk about the key positive points. Set a protocol for the following week with employees.

- 9. Focus on the things you can control in your business.** Things you can't control include, for example, rising material costs and health care premiums and falling 401(k) results. Focus the team on the controllables.
- 10. Don't live this alone. I believe we're in for a long haul – at least two more years.** Regardless of who we are, we need support systems, family, friends, fellow business colleagues and religious affiliations. But we need to resist the temptation to bring them into it as part of the problem. I firmly believe this is one of TEC's strengths. Our support systems need to be a part of our personal solutions.

I hope you believe that when the worst is over, your firm's future will be much stronger and healthier as a consequence. If you do believe this, you will make it happen. This is not the perfect storm. It's a time to test all of us, to be sure, but not a time to let the ship sink.

A year or two from now, I'm looking forward to hearing about how you faced it all, and did not sink! Until next month, I wish you good sailing on these challenging waters. ■

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