

Human Resources Today

Preston D. Cameron of Oculus Consulting Group: “Don’t lose your leadership credibility”

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By

Charlie Katz, Executive Creative Director at Bitbean



As part of my series about the “Five Things You Need To Be A Highly Effective Leader During Turbulent Times”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Preston D. Cameron.

Preston is a world-recognized international advisor to organizations of all shapes and sizes. He is focused on transforming an organizational vision into a measurable reality. Having circled the globe more than a dozen times working with a variety of organizations, he has been recognized for expertise and thought leadership in a variety of disciplines and he frequently serves as a keynote speaker and presenter for numerous conferences and expositions on these and related topics. He is a member of the Harvard Business Review Advisory Council, an opt-in research community of business professionals and an adjunct faculty member in the Strategic Leadership Program at Northern Arizona University when his schedule allows.

Thank you so much for your time! I know that you are a very busy person. Our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your ‘backstory’ and how you got started?

Thank you so much for this opportunity. I started my career with a finance degree focused on performing systems analysis and financial planning for the #1 tourist attraction in Hawaii. My career is probably less of a smooth winding road and much more similar to the tilt-a-whirl at your local amusement park! I learned quickly that organizations were anxious to have me assist them with complex transitions and complicating business process renovations as I moved from the Tourism to the Aerospace / Defense then Automotive industries, and then back and forth again. While serving as CFO for an automotive aftermarket manufacturer, I had the opportunity to change industries again and join one of the Big 4 accounting & advisory firms. And then the ultimate change happened, 9–11 and the Enron debacle. Thankfully for me, it provided the impetus to take my knowledge on the road and form my own organization.

Today, my organization continues to ride the “tilt-a-whirl” of industries working with state governments, educational institutions, entrepreneurial tech startups, manufacturing and distribution firms, and a host of service organizations. It is safe to say that once I finish one ride, I can’t wait to get my ticket punched and go again.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lessons or ‘take aways’ you learned from that?

One of my mottos in life is simply “if I’m not having fun, I’m not doing it”. And, there is a tremendous difference between fun and funny. From being asked to be the straight man in a church sit-com, to playing Santa in a shiny red sequin suit, to coaching my kid’s little league baseball teams, I’ve been asked and volunteered to play some interesting roles. The straight man involved a script in a language I didn’t understand, so it became apparent quickly that the joke was one me. Being Santa at an office party was a lot of fun, but I was the skinniest Santa that there has ever been, and that suit itched like a bear! Finally, I’ve taken more than my share of line drives in the lower extremities off the bat of 6 to 8-year old’s. These experiences along with many others have been humorous lessons in the willingness to try new things, being flexible in uncomfortable situations, and the need to constantly be alert to potential hazards that may not seem realistic or likely.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story?

The example of family and friends probably goes without saying much else. But in the world of business, the two individuals who had the most influence on my current career were competing partners at Grant Thornton, when I joined the firm in the mid-1990s. While I worked for Linda, she had a great relationship with a Partner (Steve) in another office who needed my skill sets for a project he was leading. I consider both of them tremendous mentors and was fortunate to have both of them as career coaches. Looking back, they were able to share my skills to benefit both of their projects. I even spent 4 months shuttling between their two projects in two different mid-west cities. Looking back, I spent a crazy amount of time jetting from city to city, but the experience and relationships I built with each of them outweighed the personal travel consequences. Today, I still consider them excellent coaches, mentors, and friends.

Extensive research suggests that “purpose driven businesses” are more successful in many areas. When your company started, what was its vision, what was its purpose?

Our goal and focus have always been to assist organizations with the difficult decisions that are created as they integrate technology into their operations. Decisions surrounding organizational structure, human integration, and positive performance results are a constant battle that technology will impact in a variety of ways. During this challenging period of 2020, we have spent a considerable amount of time giving back to our local community and the very small organizations that are struggling to survive. Having a goal to contribute and give back to our local community has helped us maintain a focus on what constitutes relevancy and success.

Thank you for all that. Let's now turn to the main focus of our discussion. Can you share with our readers a story from your own experience about how you lead your team during uncertain or difficult times?

Business turbulence may be relatable to a roller coaster ride. For every upside, there will eventually be a downturn, coupled with several twists and turns that make the adventure all the more exciting. Much of our work involves uncertain or difficult times for our clients. They have a vision of what they want to accomplish but they have or are struggling to get there. What may be a downturn or uncertainty to one organization can be an adventure to another organization. We first experienced this with the 9–11 attacks on the World Trade Center. The uncertainty from that event alone created a challenge we were not prepared for. Our teams regrouped and we had to completely rethink the execution on several of our projects. Looking back on our activities, completely open honest communication with everyone, expanding employee and client awareness, and realistic planning were critical to our ability to manage through that experience. The past year of Covid response has reinforced these practices and that communication must come from everyone within the organization. Imagine riding a roller coaster without the benefit of being able to see or hear what others are experiencing. The folks in our organization that are out front have played a key role in communicating what they see to the rest of the organization. Simple instructions like “right turn ahead”, or “brace for decline”, or “hold on” can make it easier for the others in our organization to anticipate and respond to what is coming.

Did you ever consider giving up? Where did you get the motivation to continue through your challenges? What sustains your drive?

Giving up was never considered an option, but a constant re-evaluation of what it is we are trying to achieve and how best to accomplish it is a constant activity. Even highly motivated and successful people have moments, even days, of doubts. Like many champion athletes, we rely on our training and practice to get us ready for game time. But when the time comes to attempt that field goal, penalty kick, or shoot the game-winning free-throw it's natural to have some doubts. It's a human instinct and condition. I've never considered giving up, but I have experienced days or weeks of self-evaluation to make sure I'm prepared for the next time we're in that situation, are we prepared as best as possible to perform.

What would you say is the most critical role of a leader during challenging times?

Agility is defined as the ability to consistently identify and capture events that prove positive to an organization's performance. Personal agility is demonstrated in the leader's efforts to see and adjust to the challenges the organization is facing. Whether it's operational agility focusing on operations and processes, portfolio agility and the ability to quickly and effectively shift available resources, or strategic agility to identify and respond to the big change needs while not getting wrapped up in the steady flow of small opportunities that turbulence can demand. The ability to spot the needed agility and then communicate as openly and honestly as possible is essential to managing through the turbulence.

When the future seems so uncertain, what is the best way to boost morale? What can a leader do to inspire, motivate and engage their team?

Open and honest communication and then demonstrating the values that you expect of your employees is critical. Your teams are smart, and they will see through the false pretend image that you are trying to project if you don't believe and practice what you preach. The shock of a crisis and turbulent performance can make a leader's words

less credible, especially if the walk doesn't match the talk. Make short-term, tangible, doable promises and keep those commitments.

What is the best way to communicate difficult news to one's team and customers?

Things will change quickly and dramatically during turbulence and your organization will insist on constant updates. Leaders can get distracted easily and it is not always clear who has the most accurate information. The worst scenario is the potentially destructive rumors that will take on a life of their own if the information is not made available to everyone simultaneously. Maintaining and insisting on interactive communications to reach everyone with the same information in a timely fashion is essential. Be sure to keep it going well after the worst of the crisis is over.

How can a leader make plans when the future is so unpredictable?

There are four critical factors that leaders can use to assist them with their organization's planning processes during times of unpredictability. The first is to focus on the business value of decisions. By focusing our planning efforts on the particulars of a clear purpose, direct linkage to critical objectives with explicit documentation of intended benefits, plans will be more readily accepted by the rest of the organization. The second is to maintain a consistent process of gathering information and communicating to employees. Leaders don't like to say, "I don't know", so they wait until they have definitive answers before they talk to their people. But it's tough for employees to commit to positive actions while mired in anxiety. Third, make sure that employees hear it from the organization first. Getting information about important company decisions from customers or vendors will only add to the anxiety. Finally, decisions get pushed to the top during uncertain times. Because top managers are rethinking everything, people will go passive and wait to be told what to do. Make sure you have teams addressing short-term tasks that empower employees to seek quick wins, giving them a feeling of control over results.

Is there a "number one principle" that can help guide a company through the ups and downs of turbulent times?

Organizations like employees are emotional beings. Anger and grief mount with no way to express or deal with these emotions. People might start acting in strange ways, resulting in an undermining of teamwork. We've found by creating facilitated sessions for venting, teaching organizations about dealing with trauma, and helping employees to acknowledge they are experiencing grief and anxiety, the organization can work through the turbulence quicker and emerge stronger.

Can you share 3 or 4 of the most common mistakes you have seen other businesses make during difficult times? What should one keep in mind to avoid that?

- *Downplaying or not acknowledging the difficult times will create a lack of credibility that can damage your leadership ability long after the difficulty has passed.*
- *Not communicating clearly and frequently as to the company's status and ability to work through the difficult times. Partial information is much more consoling than no information.*
- *Not recognizing the need for constant reassurance for employees and customers.*
- *Not providing frequent feedback sessions from employees and customers allowing them to share their grief and anxiety to ensure that the company is responding to their key concerns.*

Generating new business, increasing your profits, or at least maintaining your financial stability can be challenging during good times, even more so during turbulent times. Can you share some of the strategies you use to keep forging ahead and not lose growth traction during a difficult economy?

The first is to accept the fact that other people and organizations are just as much an individual as you are. That means they too have their strengths; they too have their ways of getting things done; they too have their values.

You have to know the strengths, the performance modes, and the values of the folks in your organization, to help channel them toward new opportunities.

The second part is to take responsibility for communication. Organizational messaging is essential. Today the great majority of people within the organization work with others who have different tasks and responsibilities. Organizations are no longer built on force but on trust. Demonstrating and maintaining the trust relationship between members of the organization and with our customers has led to new opportunities that expand our capabilities.

Here is the primary question of our discussion. Based on your experience and success, what are the five most important things a business leader should do to lead effectively during uncertain and turbulent times? Please share a story or an example for each.

First, recognize that gloom and doom will fill the air. Everyone is preoccupied with the negative current situation. They feel guilty about the people who are being let go. Morale will sink, and it is hard to find the energy to be creative or productive when the future looks bleak. Leaders should show that there is a future beyond the crisis. Repeating a credible positive vision is essential, coupled with an emphasis on the steps being taken to avoid the reoccurrence of the present crisis. Assurance that the organization is readying itself to avoid a repeat of the problem will help eliminate the gloom and doom.

Second, recognize that changes are expedient, and not strategic. Management can sometimes make decisions that seem logical as strategic decisions but are ridiculous in the short-term. We were working with a client who was executing a downsizing initiative that involved several hundred employees over 3 months. We were asked to assist the organization after they had begun the downsizing process. One of their strategic decisions was to notify employees who were being let go on Wednesday so that they had ample time to transition their work, clean out their desks, etc. In the strategic decision to protect the company's systems, employee access to information systems was terminated on Tuesday night. Thus, any employee who arrived at work on Wednesday and could not get access to company systems was unintentionally being notified that they were on the list of downsized employees. Word spread fast which caused considerable stress and challenges for managing through the downturn.

Third, the casualties of the turbulence will dominate your attention. Sometimes leaders want to do the humane thing by offering help to people who are cut while neglecting the remaining team members upon whom the future will depend. Some of these "keepers" will not recognize their value and they may decide to leave, thereby compounding the impact on the organization.

Don't lose your leadership credibility. The shock of the crisis lurches in business performance and strategy, and shortfalls in goal achievement make the top leader's words less credible. Some employees will react with the pessimistic attitude of "why believe any new strategy being proposed now"? Motivation declines and the organization can sense an approaching death spiral. By making short-term, tangible, doable promises, and keeping them, credibility can be maintained through a downturn protecting not just the leader, but the organization as well.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

I started my career as the financial planning and systems analysis guru for a tourist attraction in Hawaii. After a few short months, I found myself making a presentation to the Board of Directors which included the Chairman of the Marriott Corporation and also the Chairman of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. I was a little more than intimidated, to say the least! About 10 minutes into my presentation, the board begin to divert the discussion to focus on two of the scenarios I had included in my information. The discussions centered on evaluating two key attributes of the scenarios, including projecting visitor traffic to the islands and the resulting traffic to our attraction. The economy was entering a downturn and declines in visitor traffic would present a significant financial challenge to the organization. Concerns were expressed that economic variables may harm travel. The

projections for a worst-case scenario received a lot of attention. It was then that one of the Board members said, “Listen, we can’t operate in fear. Life happens and we can deal with it”. That phrase has become a personal motto for myself and many of my teams. “Life happens and we can deal with it” means we may need to make some adjustments, we may need to make some refinements, or we may need to make some dramatic changes, but we can do it.

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Thank you so much for sharing these important insights. We wish you continued success and good health!

By

Charlie Katz, Executive Creative Director at Bitbean

As Exec. Creative Director, Charlie Katz spearheads the full gamut of creative marketing for [Bitbean Software Development](#) in Lakewood, NJ. Charlie has over 20 years’ experience in major NY and west coast agencies, including Dancer-Fitzgerald-Sample, now Saatchi & Saatchi, D’Arcy-MacManus & Masius, and Wells, Rich Greene. Starting as a junior copywriter and moving up to Exec. Creative Director, he developed creative strategies and campaigns for such clients as Colgate, R.J. Reynolds, KFC, and Home Depot. Along the way he won numerous national and international awards including the NY Advertising Club ‘Andy’.

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