

LEVINE ON LEADERSHIP

Smart decisions always require clear thinking

The economic environment is creating pressure right now. Headlines talk about the mortgage industry, the economic impact and other uncontrollable variables. In the second quarter, we can anticipate the release of proxy information containing executive compensation data that will create another stir in the business community. And as the first quarter ends, we're taking stock of how our businesses are performing.

Right now, the ability to scrutinize our businesses objectively and the courage to hold ourselves accountable for what we see is critical. But it will require clear thinking.

Many people see the change of seasons and the arrival of Passover and Easter as an opportunity to take a deep breath and gain perspective. I challenge you to go beyond that kind of thinking this year. Renewal must be more than a single moment in the spring. To be an effective leader, you must have a strategy to maintain balance and clarity.

In my experience working with leaders, when they commit to the following behaviors, the impact is both liberating and profound.

Do one thing at a time: Multitasking creates chaos. Certainly there's a place for it – watching a ball game from the treadmill at the gym, for example. But when the tasks get more complicated, multitasking damages your ability to get things done. Whether you're in a meeting, on the phone or reviewing the financials, focus on that one thing.

Say when the baby is ugly: When something isn't right, say so. If

you don't have people around you who can handle honest, constructively offered feedback, consider making some changes. Tiptoeing around the truth wastes time and energy.

Avoid toxic people: I guarantee

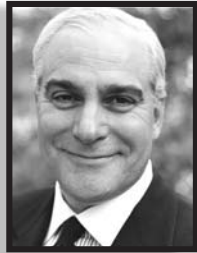
there are people around you who suck the life right out of you. They may be talented – they may even be revenue generators – but if their negativity makes you or people around you cynical, frustrated or drained, cut the tie. It may seem counterintuitive to talk about separating from people in the spirit of renewal, but this one thing can set

you free.

Seek out the energy generators: Just as there are those who rob you of energy, some people give it back. These are the solution-oriented, creative people who are willing to risk and believe. Too often, we make the mistake of thinking these people "don't need attention from us" to be productive. But the truth is, we need them. Spend time with these people. It pays off.

Stay focused on your values:

Many in the sub-prime mortgage industry seem to have lost the connection to their personal values. Office workers have a saying: "If you wouldn't feel comfortable reading it on the bulletin board over the water cooler, don't put it in an e-mail." I think business leaders should have a similar saying: "If you wouldn't feel comfortable reading about your decision on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, make a different decision." Ignoring your values drains you; honoring them will invigorate you and the people around you.



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Get to a higher ground:

Perspective is everything. Make time to get to a higher ground each day so that you can see your environment clearly. As leaders, we should spend most of our time on strategic discussions, but depending on the size of our organizations, we can be sucked into the tactical pretty quickly. Sometimes this is necessary; but if you find yourself living there, get out. Delegate and step back to see the whole picture. Maintaining this perspective energizes the strategic thinker.

A glass of wine, a cut flower: If you never enjoy the fruits of your labor, you begin to resent the labor. No matter how busy you think you are, you have time to spend on the things that you're working for. For me, I like a nice glass of wine and cut flowers from my garden. Time with my family is important. I love my work, but I don't subordinate my life to it. In fact, I'm able to bring so much passion to my professional life because I take the time for family and the occasional cut flower.

Personal renewal is not a new-age spa concept. It's a serious business issue. People are depending on you to maintain the focus that allows you to concentrate on key data, stay honest with yourself about what it means and see a clear path forward.

That's how you get better business outcomes, and that's your job.

Stuart R. Levine is chairman and CEO of Stuart Levine & Associates LLC, an international consulting and leadership development company. He is author of "Cut to the Chase: And 99 Other Rules to Liberate Yourself," "Gain Back the Gift of Time" and "The Six Fundamentals of Success: The Rules for Getting it Right for Yourself and Your Organization." For consulting and speaking engagement information, please call (516) 465-0800.