

LEVINE ON LEADERSHIP

# Tough questions could prevent another tough year

It strikes me that in my professional life, much of the value I bring comes from my willingness to respectfully, but directly ask tough questions. As a consultant to chief executives and a public board member, it's a big part of what I'm paid for. To start the New Year, I want to offer you some of the most important and difficult questions that I think leaders face and respectfully challenge you to start this year by taking them head on.

## Who will run my business if I can't?

In the event of your untimely demise or, more positively, if you won the lottery tomorrow, who will run your business (do you have a succession plan in place)? When I ask this question, the person across the desk invariably starts to throw out names of people who might be successful. If that's your inclination, stop. Step back and start by defining the criteria for success. What knowledge, skills and attributes will your job require now and in the environment you anticipate going forward? Criteria depersonalizes your analysis and improves your thinking. I see too many headlines about major companies with highly paid boards that didn't clearly answer this question and are paying the price. Don't let yours be among them.

## If I were recruiting today, would I still hire the same people?

This is a tough one. You've grown attached to the people on your team –

you've been through a lot together. Instead of asking, do I have the right team in place, ask, "If I were recruiting today, would I pursue my current CFO, compliance officer or COO?"

Again, start with the criteria for success. Then, take on the tougher question still: If you wouldn't hire one of them again, what will you do about it?

## Will my key talent be here next year?

When times are good and great talent is in the right roles, it's tempting to think they will always be there. But if you don't consider the possibility that they won't,

it will be too late by the time you're face-to-face with it. If you want to keep them, know their goals. Ask, "Where do you want to be in a few years and how can I help you get there?" Sometimes you can't keep them. Sometimes you even hired them knowing you would ultimately lose them, but supporting their goals lets you keep them as long as possible and gives you the real-time knowledge to plan for their departure.

## What do people think of working for our company?

When a new hire accepts your offer, ask, "What appealed to you about the company?" Add a question to your performance evaluations to learn why people stay. And most importantly, conduct open, honest exit interviews when people leave. You cannot attract and retain talent without these three pieces of insight. Make sure you have

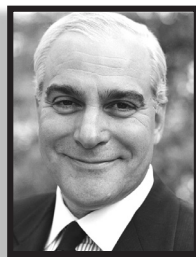
them, take them seriously and use them to improve your employment product and your retention.

## What questions are our people and our customers asking?

Years ago, I spent three days with famed chief executive Roger Millikin in Spartansburg. I learned that he regularly asked his direct reports, "What questions are your people asking?" He believed that he gained insight from hearing the questions that he couldn't get from opinions. At your first staff meeting in January – ask your team, "What questions are you hearing from your people?" Take it one step further and ask your account managers and sales team, "What kinds of questions are our customers and prospects asking?" Listen hard to the questions and consider what kinds of confusion, concerns, fears, opportunities or hopes are embedded in the questions. Over time, you'll mine precious insights about your company, your processes, your marketplace and your value proposition.

Some of this sounds simple, but in my experience, many leaders shy away from these discussions. But you don't want your best people to melt away in '08 or your customers to evaporate because you didn't have the discipline or courage to ask and listen. Taking the hard questions head on can positively impact your business results for years to come. Best wishes for success in the New Year.

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