



# The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

## Leadership Growth - Addition by Subtraction?

Ever since September 2008 – when the news of Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch broke – we have experienced the impact of the world financial crisis at work and home. We've witnessed lay-offs, attempted to make sense of shrunken retirement accounts, and watched our businesses slow. On some level, we've been shaken to the core – the crisis dancing all too closely to our fundamental needs as human beings for safety, security, and a sense of belonging. However, in the midst of this greater state of contraction and fear, comes also the opportunity to find the leadership paradox inherent in any situation. As a coach, this provides an opportunity to help myself and others reframe our view of “contraction or subtraction”. In moving beyond the negative connotations, in what areas of life could “subtraction” actually be additive if we peeled away the excess or the unnecessary extras?

Physical Spaces & Health: There's been much written recently about using the downturn as an opportunity to simplify our lives – finding efficiencies in our offices/homes and doing less with material things. As I've worked with leaders through the years on managing time and energy, it's been amazing to see the immediate relief from overwhelm by cleaning up spaces, streamlining routines, and focusing on the critical path. And just like our physical spaces, we can bring “addition by subtraction” to our bodies and health as well. Reducing caffeine, sugar, and even cutting down our expectations that a work-out is at least an hour, we can increase and add to our physical energy. Walking for 20 minutes a day is better than not at all and more often an achievable goal. Small reductions bring real gains.

Relationships & Communication: We might also look to reducing the excess and unnecessary extras in our relationships and communication with others. What would happen if we became less reactive to difficult colleagues or teammates? What if we lessened our attachment to personal or functional agendas and led as an owner of the firm or enterprise wide leader? As we shrink our reactive cycle times spent in anger, guilt, frustration, or judgment, we increase our energy and productivity as well as increase the likelihood of achieving strategic priorities and organizational goals. As we streamline our communications, filter our messages, and ask questions that shape others' thinking, we see gains in executive presence and our abilities to influence others.

Mental Clarity: Interestingly, as leaders make key subtractions in the first two domains above, they gain an additional positive effect on their mental clarity and state of mind. As physical spaces and bodies clear, relationships strengthen, and communications become more effective, our minds begin to ease as well. Couple this with reducing the ways we distract ourselves from the true tasks or issues at hand – watching TV, surfing the internet, checking email – we gain greater clarity of mind that brings gains in productivity, decision making, and strategic thinking. I've even seen some clients finally get a good night's sleep after learning how to reduce and manage their own mental churning and worry.

Values & Attitudes. Ultimately, the financial crisis gives us an opportunity as leaders to examine the very values and attitudes which led to a state of excess in the first place. Perhaps the downturn in the economy gives us a view into “subtraction by addition” – leadership whereby the fundamental tenants and values of stewardship, accountability, and responsibility were chipped away at for gains in greed, territory, and consumption. What would happen then if we did the reverse and shed layers of ego? What would happen if we refused gains in situations where we're asked to compromise our relationships, quality, or even worse, our integrity?

Take a look at your own world today. What excess or extras could you subtract and what would emerge? Perhaps, first a very difficult look at holes we've actually been trying to fill with the excess – meaning, purpose, and intimacy in our lives. Or perhaps, taking away the unnecessary extras would give you a taste of the essentials and my suspicion is again, you'd find the parts and people that bring meaning, purpose, and intimacy as well.

-Amy Jen Su

## Quarterly Reflection:

*"When you make some special effort to achieve something, some excessive quality, some extra element is involved in it. You should get rid of excessive things...when you bow, you should just bow; when you sit, you should just sit; when you eat, you should just eat. If you do this, the universal nature is there..."*

– Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki

Take a moment to reflect on your growth as a leader – what could you subtract or limit in your life that would bring new energy or time to the key priorities, initiatives, or values in your life?

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Where do I have excess or unnecessary extras in my life?
2. What would I gain if I let go of, subtracted, or reduced these?
3. What is the one "subtraction" I could make right now in my life that would be most "additive"?

## Quarterly Book Selection: Commencement Address from Steve Jobs

*What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here's our book selection for this quarter:*

Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford University Commencement Address  
By Steve Jobs

This quarter, we feature a YouTube video (yes, we're multi-media) which you can find at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hd\\_ptbiPoXM&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hd_ptbiPoXM&feature=related)

The video features Steve Jobs, CEO and co-founder of Apple Computers and of Pixar Animations delivering a commencement address to Stanford University's 2005 graduating class. Why is this video a favorite? A leader must be able to see opportunities even in desperate times or when things don't go according to strategy. In today's economic times, it is an outlook that is imperative. Jobs passionately shares 3 life stories that convey the ability to find the positive despite the circumstances. While inspirational in its telling, Jobs' reflections are grounded in real life situations that we could all learn from.

## From the Coach's Corner: Managing Your Ripple Effect

### From the Client:

"Times are tough. Given the constant stream of economic bad news, I am finding the morale in my organization very low. My team is having a difficult time dealing with the ambiguity of the future. It is clear they are concerned about their jobs, the company and the impact of the economy on their personal lives. I find it difficult to just say "business as usual" knowing good and well that we are living in unusual times... that said, I can't afford to have everyone in a rut."

### From the Coach's Corner:

As the saying goes, misery loves company. But that doesn't mean you need to partake in the pity party. As a leader, the most critical thing you can do during this period is to be a contrarian. Don't go with the flow. Don't be part of the pack. Don't be a lemming. You must realize that while the business data paints a dismal picture, they need not alone drive your organization's mood. Surely you need to manage the business activities critical to your organization's success and survival. BUT, don't lose sight that emotions are contagious and you, as the leader, are the primary carrier of the emotional bug. Like a drop of water falling into a lake, your mood has a ripple effect in your organization... it goes deep and it goes wide. So the question is: how do you manage your ripple effect during tough times? Here are five practical do's and don'ts to get you through.

#### **1. Do listen. Don't hoard problem solving.**

Listening is one of the most underestimated competencies of being an effective leader. I've never had a coaching client kick off an engagement by saying "I want to become a more effective leader by learning to listen." Yet, when you ask their stakeholders, listening is what most folks want from their leaders. While driving results has its place, your ability to listen to your team, to make them feel heard and valued, and to just simply give them a space to voice their concerns is invaluable during these tough times. Hold one-on-ones (and don't cancel them), take time during team meetings for airing of concerns, and for goodness sake, don't interrupt with a solution to every problem that you hear. Yes – while listening is imperative, it requires managing your desire to help by hoarding all the problem solving. Don't become the source to solve everyone's problems. Where you can, certainly do so. But beware of losing focus and impact by taking ownership of all problems and in the process disempowering your team. That is a futile goal and not necessarily what your team needs from you.

#### **2. Do be visible. Don't hole up in your office.**

This is a simple one: do the walk around. Not only do you need to be heard (as tip #1 emphasized), you need to be seen. Walk the halls. Pop your head into someone else's office. I can already hear the excuses: "I'm in meetings all day; I don't have the time; I see them in meetings...blah, blah, blah." I get it. I really do. But I don't accept it. Having a sense of connection with your team is critical if what you want to do is recalibrate the mood. They need to see you. Remember, you're contagious. They can't catch the bug if you're holed up in your office. For five minutes a day, twice a day, get up and walk the halls. Take the long way back to your office from your meeting. It is hard to believe how much of an impact a simple "How's it going?" will make when folks are reeling.

#### **3. Do share what you know. Don't say nothing.**

Transparency is key. And yet, in times of uncertainty, leaders have to manage their message. We've all certainly been in situations where there are some things we just can't reveal to our teams. This is okay. There is a difference between being honest about what you know and revealing everything you know. Framing your messages with "Here's what I do know... here's what I don't know... and here's what I can't address for the moment" makes it clear where you stand. No one expects you to breach organizational confidentiality but they do expect you to inform where possible. If at the end of the day your message is "I have no new news" it is better than saying nothing.

#### **4. Do have a "do or die" goal. Don't make everything high priority.**

Distractions are not lacking during uncertain times. As a leader, you serve your team well by helping them find any sense of concreteness among the ambiguity. Rallying your team around a "do or die" goal (or a rallying cry as Pat Lencioni calls it in "The Five Dysfunctions of Team") puts a stake in the ground as to what the focus is for the coming months. Work with your team to answer the question "if there is one thing we must accomplish above all else in the next 6 months, what is it?" Having a sense of focus provides an anchor during the tumultuous period.

**5. Do practice abundance in new ways. Don't perpetuate fear.**

It sounds like your team wants to collectively get into fetal position and pull the blanket over their heads. Fear can lead to retreat and if you are carrying an attitude of scarcity, it can easily pervade your team. Challenge yourself and your team to be abundant during a period where most will likely want to be scarce. Does this mean handing out extravagant bonuses and wilding out on expenses? Goodness gracious, no! (please say no!) Rather, redefine abundance for your team. How helpful can you be to each other? What role can you play in helping your community? One organizational leader I work with found that there was no better time than now to provide pro bono services to select non-profits in his area.

Practice these do's and don'ts. Interestingly, what you'll find is that the steps you take to manage your ripple effect will help you make a more positive leadership impact during these tough times and far beyond.

*-Muriel Maignan Wilkins*