

PRESSURE BUILDS TO PROSPER OR SUCCUMB

by Dr Ceri Evans on Friday, 27 June 2008

The pressure is building for Middle East businesses. Financial success has brought rewards but also greater expectations. Rising oil prices and the construction frenzy represent both strengths and vulnerabilities.

The business environment is undergoing escalating change. New faces compete for market share; the rate of inflation is worrying; exchange rates burden importers; the labour market is shrinking and mobile like never before; and legal protections are being eroded.

Overall, there is a paradoxical feeling of uneasiness, which, in part, is based on a commonly held view that many companies may have prospered despite of, rather than because of, their business methods.

In this context, the wise leader is casting their gaze inward, to try to future-proof their organisation against less favourable external economic conditions. But many are finding shaky foundations.

A particular issue arising from protected markets is that the quality of execution by front line workers has not been critical, and standards have slipped - or in many cases have never been developed.

Front line workers are under pressure because they work in 'real time', respond immediately to challenging situations such as dealing with an irate customer or making an important sales call without the luxury of planning and preparation.

Increasingly, businesses need employees who can think on their feet, make good decisions with limited information, and execute effectively under pressure.

The lack of quality of the front line is a potential blind spot for large organisations. However important top-level management may be, you can never overestimate the cumulative impact of thousands of minor everyday events, at grass roots level.

The problem is that humans often respond poorly to pressure, manifesting aggressive, passive, or avoidant responses which undermine effective activity.

But some individuals seem to thrive under pressure in business because, like high performers in other domains such as sport, music and education, they have three important mental characteristics: clarity, intensity, and accuracy.



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Clarity is concerned with the overview, having a clear "big picture" understanding of the task at hand. Intensity occurs when the task has emotional significance for the individual or group, so that they persevere when things get uncomfortable. And accuracy occurs when the required skills are precisely defined and developed. All three components are necessary - miss any one of these attributes out, and performance declines sooner rather than later.

The key to success under pressure is the ability to switch attention constantly between the overview and the immediate task: no point focusing on details of execution if you haven't got a clear sense of overall strategy - and vice versa. The principle was propounded by the Japanese swordsman and philosopher, Musashi, and was called the Gazing Principle.

The inner workings of the mind can help or hinder a successful outcome. It is important to connect strategy to execution. The Middle East is moving from a world of protected success to one in which the key will be the mental edge to perform under pressure.

As external advantages slip away, success will increasingly depend on internal factors, particularly the ability of front line workers to perform under pressure. The reality is that many organisations will be found wanting. Those leaders honest enough to accept the limitations of their front line and supporting management structures will be in the best position to prosper, rather than succumb to the pressure.

To do so, they must directly address the "inside story" - how people perform effectively under pressure.

This article is taken from an interview given by Dr Ceri Evans in Dubai to the Arabian Business News

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