



# What can aspiring managers learn from *the recession?*

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Sitting in Row Five at Vinopolis for the Executive Grapevine Conference recently I heard David Fairhurst of McDonald's sharing some astounding figures on the number of articles written about leadership in the downturn. I've done a quick Google search and found 2.46m articles, quotes and papers to read! Some are research-based, some heavily theoretical and grounded in academia. I can't promise either but offer my own thoughts and beliefs drawn from a long stint at one of the High Street banks, followed by seven years insight into other organisations through consulting.

## We got lazy

Sorry to say that - but we did! We had cash so it was easier to throw money at a problem than to find the root cause and fix it. Lou Manzi of GSK said: "These times are no different - it makes us focus on what we should have been doing in the good times" and he very specifically said "should". We don't need major confessions here, no hair shirt required - but we need to accept that now's the time to get on with doing the right things and doing them right.

Here are three things I would encourage aspiring leaders to think about:

### 1. Be curious - you've already got great people - find them

At the risk of upsetting my pals in recruitment you don't need to spend 10-25% on search fees for all senior hires. You've already spent a lot bringing good people into your organisation, look after them, get to know which have the potential

to be leaders and nurture them. A wealth of research supports the idea that internal hires enjoy a better success rate than external hires, for a whole host of reasons. You know their track record, true skills, capability and of course attitude. And they understand the culture of your organisation, "how it works around here" and know it works for them. Unless there's a specific skill you need to hire in I encourage you to have a good look in-house first.

You don't need sophisticated tools. Draw a basic 9-box grid, with "performance" against one axis and "potential" against the other, then plot your people onto the grid. I bet you will fairly accurately identify your talent-pool up in the top right-hand boxes.

### 2. Be brave - tackle the "too difficult" pile

I don't mean your tax return or tidying the garage, but the people in the "too difficult" pile. You know who I mean. The cynics who throw cold water on all bright ideas, and bring down everyone around them. Those who nod in agreement at meetings then carry on exactly as before. Finally the "can't be bothered" brigade whose apathy is almost tangible. Don't ignore them any longer.

Dr John Mahoney-Phillips of UBS says, "the correlation of performance to engagement is key". Happy, committed people will deliver for you, the more you have on your team the stronger your performance.

Some people may be easy to re-engage once you understand their frustrations and help them to a fix. For others you'll

need to be brave, using your performance management skills to help them find alternatives where they can feel happy and committed. It's a win-win situation, it frees up a desk so you can bring in someone who will add to the team effort. And it sends a clear message to team members who are currently sitting on the fence! Go on - be brave!

### 3. Be creative - it doesn't have to cost a packet

I don't mean to be kitsch, but I have more fun making cookies with our girls, decorating them with garish icing for the Christmas tree than buying a box of baubles from WH Smith!

With budgets slashed and procurement keeping a tight rein on the purse strings it's time to get creative:

- ★ Use internal people to coach and mentor your talent
- ★ Bring them together for brown bag lunches
- ★ Ask your favourite suppliers for freebies - they might say yes
- ★ Use senior people as speakers for events and create some role models
- ★ Offer stretching internal assignments to develop staff rather than training courses

Tom Crawford from E.on says "the credit crunch is your personal trainer - when you think you've done enough, it makes you go that extra mile!"

So be curious, brave and creative. You'll emerge all the more ready to grasp the opportunities the future holds!