



MAGENTA PERFORMANCE
PARTNERS

LEADING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY



MAGENTA INSIGHTS

INTRODUCTION

Prisoner of War camps are somewhat unusual places to look for lessons in leadership.

However the anxiety and uncertainty that accompanies incarceration in such a dangerously hostile setting provides valuable learning to help people deal with anxiety and uncertainty in the workplace.

Admiral James Stockdale was the highest ranking POW in the Vietnam War. Having been captured when a plane he was piloting was shot down over North Vietnam, Admiral Stockdale spent seven and a half years as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese. For much of that time he was held in the notoriously harsh prison which came to be known as the 'Hanoi Hilton'.

Stockdale survived, and was finally released after the end of the war in February 1973, still suffering terrible injuries sustained as part of the torture he received. In his book 'Good to Great' Jim Collins writes about discussions he had with Stockdale regarding his experience as a POW, and how he had coped with the horrendous conditions, treatment and uncertainty which he had endured.

Quoting Stockdale from Collins book... *"I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."*

When Collins asked who didn't make it out of Vietnam, Stockdale replied:
"Oh, that's easy, the optimists. They were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."

Stockdale's story provides powerful messages for us all, and not least for leaders of teams who are grappling with uncertainty – whether that is due to changed market conditions, loss of key staff or customers, takeover activity or anything else that has the potential to create a lack of clarity and confidence about the future. The following pages include tips for leaders, based on Stockdale's example and message, to help their people move as strongly as possible through uncertainty.

LESSONS FROM THE POW CAMP

Stockdale's perspective was that you must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

Collins described this ability to hold both hope for the future and acknowledgement of the current reality in hand at the same time as the **Stockdale Paradox**.

F Scott Fitzgerald, in an entirely different context, described something similar when he noted that ***'the test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function'***.

The experience and writing Admiral Stockdale and Gatsby's creator provide invaluable lessons if you are a leader who is grappling with the challenge of leading when times are tough, or when uncertainty prevails.

In your language, and action, you will be well served by addressing, in roughly equal measure, both the current reality and the promotion of real hope for the future.

"the test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed thoughts in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function"

F Scott Fitzgerald

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR LEADERS

Lots of messages and thoughts flood people's minds when times are tough or uncertain. Many will be inaccurate, unfounded and unhelpful.

As a counter-balance, if you are leading a team in an environment of uncertainty you'll need to stay extra close to your team, increase the number of times you communicate, and provide plenty of scope for people to air any anxieties they hold.

In terms of your dialogue and messaging, the following tips are recommended.

- Check the **'reality vs hope ratio'** in your messaging – are they in balance, and are both genuine.
- Leaders don't have to have all the answers. It's sometimes just not possible in times of uncertainty. In such times, leaders should not be shy about saying "I don't know". But when they do say that, they need to follow it up with some clear statements and direction that begins with the words... **"But I do know that..."**
- Providing team members with extra opportunities to **share their ideas and feelings** about the uncertainty helps leaders better understand the current reality and the pathway ahead. It also helps the team members feel greater hope for the future, as they feel heard and are likely to take stronger and more confident ownership of the initiatives identified to move forward.
- Leaders who **listen well** are usually perceived by their team members to be much more connected with the current reality – brutal or otherwise – than leaders who do not listen well.
- When addressing the current reality, **address both the 'what' and the 'why'**. The latter is important to help people understand and gain comfort that the underlying causes of the uncertainty are acknowledged, understood and being addressed by the leaders.
- Leaders who are **consistent** instil greater hope. Being consistent through tougher times promotes confidence in the direction and clarity about what people need to stay focused on.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR LEADERS - CONTINUED

- It's sometimes harder to identify reasons for hope. This can be especially so without being disingenuous, inauthentic, clichéd and somewhat patronising. Whilst additional thought and care is often required, this is not a reason neglect the balance in leaders' messaging.

Some of the **sources of hope** that we have observed leaders point to include:

- ✓ Opportunities to learn and test new skills
 - ✓ The future sense of satisfaction that will come from overcoming the uncertainty or adversity
 - ✓ Greater teamwork arising from having to work together through tough and uncertain times
 - ✓ The benefits of becoming sharper competitively
 - ✓ The reality that uncertainty never lasts forever, and the upswing cycles always return
 - ✓ The quality of the team and the quality of the organisation's customer relationships
 - ✓ The strength of the organisation's reputation in the market
- Remember that having and communicating a **concrete plan** – that addresses the reality – does, of itself, deliver hope. The plans don't need to promise a complete solution (as that's not always possible to identify in the midst of uncertainty), but they should make clear the best next steps to move things forward. Bringing the planning horizon closer enables leaders to articulate a plan, with a sense of purpose and immediate impact – and without stretching it out to a point that people might struggle to engage with or buy into.
 - Emphasize that, in uncertain times, **everyone** across the organisation needs to communicate effectively. Ensure people have ownership of the need to communicate openly and promptly.
 - Refresh the team's understanding of the **organisation's purpose** and the impact of its products, services and collective expertise and experience.

The presence of leaders, communicating (listening and speaking) purposefully with empathy, consistency, and clarity about the organisation's vision and each person's role is key to retaining a tight focus and performing exceptionally - and not just in times of uncertainty.



ADDRESS

Level 32, 101 Miller Street
North Sydney NSW 2060

TELEPHONE

+61 2 9959 2354

EMAIL

info@magentaperformance.com

WEB

www.magentaperformance.com

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