

Perspective

By Justin Pinkerman

Distraught over massive financial losses incurred during the past year, Adolf Merckle scrawled a suicide note to his family and wandered out the door into a dark, wintry night. He made his way for the railway where he stood by the tracks and waited in the cold. Spotting the headlight of an oncoming railcar, he threw himself under the train and took leave of this world.

As tragic as the suicide was, it would not have received worldwide press apart from one shocking fact: Adolf Merckle was valued at 9.2 billion dollars, ranking 94th on Forbes 2008 list of the world's richest persons.

It can be hard to fathom the extent of Mr. Merckle's wealth, a billion dollars being such a staggering sum. Think of it this way, 9,000 people could each win a million dollars in the lottery, pool their money together, and still have less money than Mr. Merckle was worth. Or, the entire nation of Haiti (8.5 million people) could work for two and a half years without accumulating income equal to Mr. Merckle's portfolio.

A family statement, issued after Mr. Merckle's untimely death, read as follows: "The desperate situation of his companies, caused by the financial crisis, the uncertainties of the last few weeks and his powerlessness to act, broke the passionate family entrepreneur and he took his own life." Surely Mr. Merckle's financial missteps and poor investment decisions must have been painful to stomach. Watching his business empire suffer had to have been difficult for a man of his status. Even so, Mr. Merckle had billions of dollars to his name. It's astonishing to consider the monumental loss of perspective that led the German billionaire to take his own life.

As evidenced by the tragic case of Adolf Merckle, even the most prosperous individual is not immune to a descent into despair. With corporations cutting payrolls and the stock market on the downswing, many leaders face worrisome bottom lines, dwindling investment portfolios, or even unemployment. Many find themselves in the fight of their lives, struggling daily to gain a healthy perspective.

Two Pointers to Keep Perspective When Problems Persist

1) Gratitude

Leaders enter dangerous territory when they neglect to be grateful for what they have, and instead begin to fear losing what they've accumulated. The blessings of life surround everyone, but the person is rare who allows its simple benefits of life to fill his or her soul. Yet, the choice presents itself to anyone: accentuate the positives or dwell on the negatives.

Choosing to be grateful earns the greatest return in times of trouble. It's virtually impossible to be overtaken by worry when a person has a heart of gratitude. For this reason, it pays to log a gratitude journal - each day, list three things in life for which you're thankful. Don't just jot them down; roll them over in your mind. Let them sink into your spirit. Chances are, the exercise will dramatically improve your perspective.

2) Selective Hearing

For leaders, denial isn't an option. Bad news is preferable to no news in that information conveys important knowledge about the current reality. The wise stay apprised of the economic outlook and make decisions based upon incoming data. At times those decisions can be painful such as instituting a spending freeze or terminating the employment of a devoted worker. Nonetheless, leaders shoulder the load and do what must be done to move forward.

While leaders refuse to put their heads in the sand, they do have the wherewithal to unplug from negativity. At a certain point, a glut of the same dreary news damages the psyche. Leaders confront reality, but they stop short of wallowing in worry and despondence. They avoid doomsdayers and naysayers, preferring to fill their minds with hope and opportunity.

The Final Words: Press On

Hiking up a mountain summit for sunrise can seem unreasonably hard in the beginning. The steep trail causes your legs to quiver, the altitude shortens your breath, and rocks and snares threaten to trip your step. For a time, you may be tempted to quit. However, if you persevere to the top, you're greeted with the grandeur of the golden sky, and rewarded with a breathtaking perspective on the beauty of nature.

Like a mountaineer, you may be enduring a rocky, uphill stretch. If so, keep fighting to gain perspective. Hard work and persistence seldom go unrewarded, and they often carry you to a glorious destination.

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