

Leadership: Thriving in the New Normal

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I. Introduction

I am honored to stand before you today as the 2010 Distinguished Ruby Award Recipient. I am humbled that you would choose this little girl from Scottsburg, VA to receive such a prestigious award. I had menial beginnings with lots of love and support. So today I stand in recognition of so many that have been integral to what little success I have achieved and their trust in me was understood and has been part of my guiding force each and every day. In small and large ways they provided pathways that have made this recognition possible. In small and large ways they provided leadership to help me thrive in “my” new normal.

Likewise, it is an honor to stand on behalf of those who nominated me and through our experiment together we have grown in our leadership abilities and as such have thrived in the “New Normal” of Minnesota 4-H. I’ve had lots of leadership opportunities throughout my 34 years in Cooperative Extension. But it was in Minnesota where I truly got to apply the principles I had been learning in prior opportunities. I thank them for embracing my leadership style and the Dorothy-ism that came with it. I thank them for this nomination and shall be forever grateful, honored and humbled that you choose to recognize me in this way. Thank you from the bottom of my heart and the depth of my soul.

Today I wish to talk about this concept called The New Normal and my ideas about leadership and thriving in The New Normal.

II. Defining the New Normal

The term New Normal was coined some time ago then popularized by the management of Pacific Investment Mortgage Company (PIMCO) to describe the economic reset. They sought to inform and educate their investors about their expectations for the foreseeable future. The message was that the downturn is not another business cycle, but a global restructuring and re-architecting of the economic order, in which recovery would be slow, uneven, and full of setbacks. In short, they projected that the market was not coming back to the robust growth experienced of recent decades. The New Normal has since been taken as a code name to describe this market and workplace environment. In summary it refers to a period of muted growth and disinflation. This means, however, that the “normal” of prior years - stability, resources, and enough money - would no longer exist in this time of economic re-set.

Avis Sharar of Avis Consulting (www.avivconsulting.com/resources/the-key/apr-2010) identified four characteristics of The New Normal.

The first characteristic is Uncertainty which is defined as the crosscurrents, rapid change and volatility we seem to be experiencing. Some of us have downsized, rightsized, re-organized, re-engineered, and retired our workforces, hoping to eventually re-grow and replace some of this staff. We are making decisions about which programs are more important than others. And, sometimes we are complaining because other organizations are receiving funds for programs we used to conduct. Many of us are living and working in a world of uncertainty.

The second characteristic is Complexity – Problems are not resolved, they multiply and morph into greater complexity and seem to be intractable. Solutions and strategies that worked in the past no longer create the same results. For example rallying the troops doesn't seem to bring the results of past efforts. Further, some of us can't seem to adjust to one budget change before another occurs. And, the complexity surrounding issues is overwhelming and challenging at best.

The third characteristic is the Income Imperative – Income is king. Staying liquid is the imperative. First, we must generate income and charge for items that use to be free. Second, we must think of our investment not in terms of offering more programs but in terms of protecting our ability to do more programs. Further we are being called upon to build new sustainable relationships that will generate additional income for services provided.

The fourth characteristic is known as Parallel Universes - Increasingly, you find people, organizations and business who are thriving and doing fantastically well and others in the same organization, business and zip code that are suffering and struggling immensely. For some the world has come to an end with a worst case scenario. For others a new dawn is here, full of hope and possibility.

III. Thriving in The New Normal

How do you thrive in this surprising and confusing time? What are the key practices to lead change, to differentiate, and to be an agent of renewal and possibility? McKee (2010) has suggested four solutions and strategies that need to be considered for adjusting to The New Normal and making key decisions affecting whether we thrive or not.

The first solution and strategy is results, first and foremost. We must be clear about the main thing we are working on; determine what are the two or three important results we are hoping to achieve. Further, we must be "mission critical" and create overwhelming value. Identify key stakeholders and remember that we are mission critical when they cannot answer their needs or achieve their objectives without the contributions we make. If they can find the answer on the internet or from another source, we may not be mission critical. Mission critical means we create overwhelming value when they see that, with our contributions, they are many times better off--they

get where they want to be faster, safer, more efficiently, more economically, in a healthier, happier and more graceful way.

When I first arrived in Minnesota, a Director from another state questioned me about my decision to accept the position of State 4-H Program Leader, especially since Minnesota had put in place a staffing model that would surely fail. Unfortunately, this Director was not the only one who thought that we would have difficulty succeeding.

So what did we do? We chose to thrive in our New Normal. We got focused. Our stakeholders told us they were afraid of losing support for 4-H clubs and club members. So, the leadership team agreed to focus entirely on supporting clubs. We identified five (5) areas related to club sustainability and effectiveness: Assure Delivery, Ensure Quality, Grow Green, Strengthen Support, & Increase Access. Then we asked each employee, including yours truly, to report on what they would bring to the Thanksgiving table the next year in celebration. What a celebration we had as we marveled at our collective accomplishments!!

Putting results first and foremost may also mean throwing out some things and only evaluating on those results that show progress towards reaching the targeted goals. For instance, Best Buy is not concerned with how long or when someone is at the office; they are more concerned with whether or not expected progress and results are being accomplished. What if we were paid on a formula for training adults such as the number of workshops conducted times the number of adults trained? Also, what if we received a percentage of our salaries for the number of clubs and groups that are organized and sustained for at least 6 months?

Putting results first may mean we need to consider different staffing models or delivery methods. Continuing our focus on clubs, we are now looking at enhanced models to keep the momentum going and asking questions such as what if we hired hourly staff to only organized clubs and we paid them for each club that was organized? What if we invested in AmeriCorp fellows to work beside educators at the county level with the primary responsibility of organizing clubs?

In short, identify who and what you can influence. Prioritize where you want to have impact and discover how to best influence and create those results. Be clear about the difference between intent and impact.

The second solution and strategy is to remember that competition will only increase. Cooperative Extension use to be the only informal educational organization in many counties and towns. Now others are doing what used to be done by extension educators. And, technology has added to the ability of learning communities to get information without leaving their home.

What are some options here? How can we continue programs that are vital to communities when fiscal resources are limited? I think some of the business communities have figured this out; they have moved to partnerships! Do you remember

when you first stopped at a service station to gas up and you were also able to choose among competing vendors for your lunch.

What if we partnered with the American Academy of Pediatrics and became the primary organization that would teach food and nutrition and/or child development and parenting programs for the new parents? It could be co-branded and would bring value to what is already offered.

What if we targeted Baby Boomers in which trends have suggested that this group will demand products and services to help keep them feeling and looking young? We should be primed, for instance, to teach this group healthy food choice, vitamin selections, and more gardening.

What if we thought of partnerships as places where tribes gathered? That is, where people of like interest gathered. As an example, we could partner with major fitness organizations and organize 4-H fitness clubs with the company's staff serving as volunteers.

What if we were to watch trends identified in books such as 60 Trends in 60 Minutes by S. Hill or followed-up on some of the issues and trends identified by our speaker this morning and created comprehensive programming with communities to address issues appropriate for our organization. Minnesota 4-H has already partnered with 3M and National 4-H Council to develop Power of Wind 4-H programming involving multiple states in the NC Region. In Minnesota our next step is to propose to 3M Cooperate that we organize 4-H Clubs in their building with their staff serving as volunteers. Further the Exploring your Environment Curriculum, developed by Minnesota 4-H, has just become available which includes many of the concepts our speaker talked about. Surely there also must be adult programs that can be created as well.

In a highly competitive environment, we must build brand loyalty by helping consumers navigate through today's complexities and difficulties. And, we must sunset programs that aren't mission critical or require too much staff time for the benefits achieved.

The third solution and strategy is to Keep an eye on Elance, and the rest. You might be saying right now—what did she say? I said keep an eye on E-L-A-N-C-E--and the rest. I was surprised to learn about Guru.com, elance.com, EGuru.com, or odesk.com. These networks match jobs, projects, and tasks with freelancers or people who are “daylighting” while still employed. The “employer” gets her or his work completed quickly and at very competitive prices. The popular term for this is “Freelancers on Demand where you can access the best talents from around the globe to work on projects. Being able to tap skills, talents and abilities through these internet systems will provide a greater opportunity for short term staff to perform selected tasks and jobs.

The fourth solution and strategy is those “sure things” may not be. When I was a young educator I thought Extension, in its fully glory, would last forever. Two years ago, who would have bet that Ford would sell the most cars in the U.S in February,

2009. Or that this year Toyota, top-ranked in quality for years, would be under pressure because of product deficiencies, it couldn't identify. Who would have believed that their new normal could change so quickly? Likewise, who would have believed that Cooperative Extension's "new normal" would become a reality with many challenges?

There has been a fundamental shift in our economic landscape, and in the availability of revenue for nonprofits. As we adapt to the changing fiscal landscape, leaders are increasingly required to be resilient and innovative in their work in order to respond to and deliver programs and services in this **new normal**. Leading in these times is difficult, yet rewarding, and opportunities abound to explore alternative and imaginative ways of thinking, working, and being.

IV. Leadership In the New Normal

What will effective visionary and committed leadership look like in The New Normal?

- a. **The first role of leadership is to be an example, a model;** one whose life has credibility with others, integrity, diligence, and humility. Stephen Covey (2002) has suggested that this is the most fundamental of our roles and that we teach people what we ourselves are still learning. Further, I believe **the leader must display honesty and credibility**. In times of difficulty we can't fake it or bluff. The only answer is intellectual honesty and humility. I remember telling the staff and I quote, "I am not the savior of Minnesota 4-H." Level with people: tell them how you see the world, acknowledge the limits of your understanding, and ask them for their own views.
- b. **The second role of leadership is pathfinding.** This is the role of deciding what the vision and mission are, what the values are and what will be accomplished. A big mistake many leaders tend to make is to announce to people what their mission is. In true pathfinding we must always study what the needs of the people, including our employees, and discern what the value systems are, in order to come up with strategies to meet those needs while engaging the people in the process.

The leader must also have the ability to inspire. In most cases, during difficult and turbulent times, staff members begin to not trust what they hear, see, or read—they lose hope. What can the leader do? Inspire. Start with your own team - it is they who will have to inspire the rest of the organization. Then help them develop one or two realistically optimistic pictures of what can lie ahead. **This is vital; it can't feel or be like the same old, same old stuff. They need a vision** that will turn their lightbulbs on, generating creativity and ideas. Inspire your team members to focus on the new priorities by doing so yourself, fearlessly.

- c. **The third role of leadership is alignment.** Once the vision, mission, and values have been determined, then the next action step is to make sure that all of the structures and systems are aligned. In Minnesota, we "Framed the Issue"

and created new policies and practices that aligned with our new pathway. I believe that unless you institutionalize your values, they won't happen. You can't get commitment and involvement from many people if your value system is not truly exemplified by your organization's structure and policies. You certainly can't get alignment if the leader is not aligned and honoring those policies and practices.

Don't get locked into one view of things. Allow the picture to change as you gather new information; change the strategies as it is appropriate. For instance we had a goal when I arrived of doubling club enrollment. It was too overwhelming for everyone and became a stumbling block because we could not see how we would accomplish the goal. So we changed the goal to increase club membership significantly and has increase club enrollment by approximately 39% since we made that decision four years

- d. **The fourth role of leadership is empowerment.** My mentor, Covey has suggested that empowered people are the fruit of the first three leadership roles. When you have worked together to develop common vision and value systems, and have put into place structures and systems that reinforce that vision, the leader would expect to see the releasing of human creativity and resourcefulness of people in the organization and the accomplishment of the organization's worthy purpose and vision. However, the leader must manage with intensity and provide hands-on participation which is essential during these times. The leader must dig into the trenches along with the staff and provide the right details with much higher frequency than ever before. It is highly important for the leader to be interactive - listening as well as explaining, answering questions, taking the conversation to the next level, and then doing it again and again.

I am standing here today because of this empowerment model. My success is really the successes of my colleagues with whom I have taken this journey. Together we believe we were stewards of the Minnesota 4-H program and keeping it strong for generations to come. Together we each were leading within our own scope of influence and together we created our New Normal of excellence-- the Minnesota 4-H Program.

In summary, the "Thriving in The New Normal" theme proposes that our economy and our organizations will likely never get back to the "old normal", which was based on a culture of growth. By definition, The "New Normal" is based on sustaining the organization's mission. And in order to do this we must

- Get past the idea that good = growth.
- Be proud of the ability to be flexible and adapt to change.
- Make decisions that are mission-driven and relevant for the long-term.
- Focus on impact and results first and foremost.
- Be prepared to abandon ideas that no longer fit the mission.

- And, lead with engagement and empowerment and watch the skills, talents and abilities of all teams create the impossible dreams, even in the midst of turbulent and trying times.

This quote summarizes it all:

It's amazing to me that the levels of Olympic competition at the turn of the century are now the levels at which junior high school students compete. Why is that? During the last 100 years, athletes have invariably discovered new ways to run faster, jump higher, and throw farther. Success, therefore, has meant not merely doing what previous champions have done, but pioneering new methods.

John Maxwell, p. 65.

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