

ALAINA LOVE January 16, 2009, 1:38PM EST

## Plotting a Better Course for Your Company

To do that, business leaders must revisit the fundamentals such as the company's purpose and operating principles

By [Alaina Love](#)

As a [new columnist](#) for BusinessWeek.com, it will be a pleasure to explore with you the power of purpose and passion in the workplace. Beyond skills, I believe that these are the most critical human elements for any business to leverage to achieve outstanding results and are the vehicle through which individuals create fulfilling experiences at work.

I look forward to the privilege of continued dialogue with you in the months and years ahead. It is my hope that together we will discover insights that can both improve your organization and make your [work life](#) more satisfying. In my first column, we'll examine the new imperatives for leaders who are managing in today's challenging economy... and we'll be getting back to the basics of leadership that seem to have been forgotten..

### BACK...TO THE FUTURE

Imagine if you had the chance to go back in time. Armed with the knowledge you've acquired, you'd have the chance to plot a new course for your future. Would you take it? Like it or not, the current economic crisis has given business leaders a chance to do just that. How leaders capitalize on this crisis and turn it into an opportunity will determine the fate of their organizations and the fate of the employees depending on them for survival.

Consider these facts. In December 2008, the National Bureau of Economic Research announced that U.S. manufacturing had hit a 26-year low and that the economy had been in a recession since December 2007. The news came as no surprise to many business leaders, who watched unemployment rates rise to a 2008 yearend level that was equivalent to rates seen in 2003. Business has gone back in time for sure—five years, maybe more.

One response leaders could have to the steady diet of dire business news might be to panic, slash programs, plants, and head count, and engage in serious belt-tightening to prevent additional losses. We've seen plenty of that going on recently...some of it necessary. Perhaps a better reaction, however, might be for leaders to honestly look at the facts and, instead of blaming the plight of their businesses solely on the economy, examine what their organizations did or didn't do to contribute to the current situation.

This nation needs [business leaders](#) who, instead of licking their wounds and searching for someone else to fault, will plot a different course that will lead to a better outcome. A platform for sustained success in this economic climate might mean beginning at the beginning—and examining issues like these:

#### 1. COMPANY PURPOSE:

Given what leaders now know, does the company have a purpose that's sustainable for the long term? With all that has changed, it would be a mistake to assume that the mission of the company is still relevant in the new economy and that the present workforce is committed to it. It's worth the effort to revisit the questions: What do we offer in service to others that the current market will value, and what do we stand for? Only when armed with clear answers to these questions and an engaged workforce to support them can leaders begin to shape a better future for

everyone.

## **2. PASSIONATE LEADERSHIP:**

Are the leaders who are guiding the company leading with authenticity? Do they know themselves well? It's important for any leader to have a profound understanding of who they are and how their passions can be applied to the business, but it has never been more essential than now. Leaders are being called upon to inspire the workforce, act with humility rather than arrogance, and demonstrate dignity in managing employees—both those who are asked to leave and those who will remain.

## **3. PASSIONATE WORKFORCE:**

Leaders must define the workforce needed to reinvent their organizations, and they must leverage the skills and passions of everyone on the team. Accomplishing this requires deep understanding of each employee's passions, especially of those in critical positions. If their passions aren't aligned with their work roles, the organization won't maximize its investment in talent at a time when it most needs to do so.

## **4. OPERATING PRINCIPLES:**

Along with examining company purpose and individual passions, it's essential in tumultuous times to be certain that the organization's operating values—and the way they are implemented—are in line with its stated purpose. Nothing derails a company faster than leaders who espouse a set of values that they do not demonstrate. It's a credibility killer among employees, customers, and shareholders alike.

## **5. CLEAR VISION:**

No leader can flawlessly predict every twist and turn in the road, but it's essential that a vision for the future be determined without delay. At a time when many organizations are struggling for footing, it's tempting to change course on a weekly basis to stay ahead of the curve. But engaging a workforce and minimizing the fear so prevalent right now requires a consistency of vision—and leaders who frequently communicate the progress toward it.

It's time to get back to the basics. More than ever, today's economic changes have illuminated the need for leading with purpose and passion—because anything less simply won't be enough.

*Alaina Love is a writer, speaker, and the president of Purpose Linked Consulting, a leadership and organization development firm. She is co-author of the soon-to-be-published McGraw-Hill book, *The Purpose Linked Organization: How Passionate Leaders Inspire Winning Teams and Great Results*.*

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