

Journal

The Journal of Jo Ouston & Company Limited Winter 2008/09

In a recession, heads win

When Franklin Roosevelt declared “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” he was speaking at his inauguration in 1933, at the depth of the Great Depression. That depression has been much evoked by politicians and pundits in recent months, but often in technical terms and generally not reaching a consensus about its relevance for today.

But Roosevelt’s famous statement is always relevant. No economy, while fear is at its heart, can hope to thrive, and – recession or no recession - when fear is at the heart of a business it can never sustain its performance, much less move forward.

Over the years, in this and in other downturns, I have seen the reactions and discussed the problems with many clients, both organisations losing turnover and individuals confronting career crises. If the winners have one thing in common it is this: they have kept their heads, reviewed every facet of their situation, and dealt with the problem across a wide front. The ‘magic bullet’ solution just hasn’t been a factor.

The lessons are, I think, worth sharing. On other pages our contributors look at particular aspects in more detail. I offer some here in summary.

- Fear is natural, but it shuts down rational thought. Understanding emotional pressure is the first step to getting clear of fear.
- Conditions may be tough but the personal qualities that made the business or the career succeed in the first place are still there. Bank on them. They are your gold-standard
- Avoid the ‘life-boat’ mentality – the idea that rescue will come from outside. Evaluate what you have. Audit the


skills and talent on board, and direct them to their most effective use.

- Adapt intelligently. Stay loose, flexible, alert to opportunity. Expect and accept the unexpected.
- Trust creativity. Recession is the shadow of the past. Innovation is the way to make the future different, not just by product innovation but by new ways of doing things to reflect new circumstances.
- The immediate context can overwhelm. Relating to a wider stage, adjusting to a longer time-scale, can reveal other options and opportunities.
- Recognise the battles you can win. Cut your losses on the others. It will come right.
- Don’t slash and burn but do operate intelligent thrift. For example you can control training costs by more use of mentoring and skills transfer.
- Be tough without losing integrity. It’s the one quality that can’t be parked and recovered later.



Jo Ouston

My own over-riding thought is that we’re all in this together. John Donne is an unlikely economist, but ‘no man is an island’ is as sound an economic dictum as has been coined. No individual can win through a recession without seeing clearly how it is affecting everyone around. So it is vital to think what, exactly, the recession is doing to customers, to suppliers, to employers and employees, and to think of ways of adapting to take out the sting and even to change pain to gain.

These ideas don’t propose a doctrine of complacency, or of false optimism. But pessimism has no history of success. 

Jo Ouston

“fear is natural, but it shuts down rational thought”

Crisis! Where can we hide?



The work that we do with organisations critically involves the confidence of individuals to perform according to their real potential. How can we stop fear from clogging the wheels of business?

We recently discussed this issue with a long-term client, Gillian Hughes (sometime of PriceWaterhouse Coopers Consulting and SAP UK), who has been doing research with the Tavistock Centre in London on the impact of anxiety on the way that individuals, teams and organisations work. Hughes's focus was on the impact of change and her subject for study was the merger of two organisations, which involved major operational changes.

The merged organisation was under-performing. Discontent and disillusion were rife among key staff, and value was leaching away. From her objective position, and able to gain the confidence of the personnel involved, Gillian Hughes observed how a negative chain reaction had built up.

Company boards had seen value in a merger, and to realise the value had charged senior management with designing the necessary change programme. From there managers had handed down the details of the changes required, and the results staff would be expected to deliver as a result. But inadequate consultation had resulted in lack of understanding. There was no sense of enfranchisement among staff or ownership of the project, which in turn led to growing anxiety, to inward-turning and withdrawal, to under-performance, to even greater anxiety ...

While this chain reaction is helpful in understanding the pathology of anxiety in an organisation, we also wanted to know more about the specific behaviours that alerted Hughes to the problem. These were, she said, all leading to that withdrawn attitude already mentioned, to an organisation like a hedgehog curled up in a ball, going nowhere. People resorted to black-and-white thinking, with no shade or subtlety. They thought in clichés and viewed colleagues as stereotypes. They assumed victim roles, seeking refuge in blame and scape-goating. They were focussed on their old organisation rather than the new. Everyone carried a safety-first sign, showing excessive fear of mistakes.

The result of this behaviour was that people had largely withdrawn initiative and seemed to have forgotten the meaning of creativity.

So what is the solution? Although Gillian Hughes came into a situation where the disease of fear had already taken hold, she was able, by having privileged access to managers and staff, to pilot procedures that produced highly encouraging results.


"It is," she says, "all about providing space for people to think about what is going on, to open up communication channels and to recognise the importance of identifying how our emotions can drive our thinking. When we were able to build places into the programme where real dialogue could happen, you could see the immediate difference.

"Managers near the top of the chain showed positive leadership. They shared ownership of the change, and encouraged and accepted feed-back. Individuals started contributing and having the courage to try new ways of doing things.

"In this strategy it's important not just to have the right communications channels but to make sure that everyone knows they're there and that they're encouraged to use them. But as well as manager-staff sessions, peer sessions can be spectacularly helpful. I have seen the effects of managers meeting together to share opinions and problems, and observed how they move from a negative starting point to discovering plusses in the new system and almost competing with each other to contribute. This type of activity does make a huge difference."

Hughes's theme is connectedness. Fear breeds a sense of isolation which feeds on itself and stifles everything we need to move forward. One way of preventing this, as well as through the methods used by Gillian Hughes, is mentoring, which has been proved to help both those being mentored and the mentors themselves. The flexibility and confidentiality of mentoring are particularly valuable in situations where fear and anxiety are an issue.

"fear breeds a sense of isolation which feeds on itself"

The lessons of Gillian Hughes's research are not just for now, but for all the times when doubt puts a brake on potential. 

Gillian Hughes launched change management consultancy FAABC Consulting in 2006. www.faabc.com

Mentoring – the key to ‘head-up’ performance

Top sports coaches often praise players who go about their job with their ‘heads up’, the ones who are able to play, and to see all the time what’s going on round them – the pass they can give or take, the positions of the other players, the creative opportunities all over the field.

Contrast this with the ball-at-his-feet, head down type, covering ground for sure, but not achieving goals because their focus doesn’t reach beyond their own role.

Sounds familiar? How many of us have been trapped at times in our careers when our own immediate task has so absorbed, even overwhelmed us, that we’ve lost sight of how our role fits into the wider picture. It’s a tough spot to get out of, because the harder we try to up our performance the more we keep our heads down, wondering why all this tight focus isn’t getting results. And it’s not just tough for the individuals involved, it’s tough for their managers too. Here’s this talented employee, working his socks off yet under-performing. What’s the problem? What’s the solution?

My observation is that such problems are most likely to crop up when something has changed. The seven most common are these :

- an individual is new to the organisation
- an individual has been given a new role
- the organisational or departmental structure has changed
- a new boss has arrived
- new technology has been introduced
- responsibilities have been reassigned/targets redefined
- a major cultural or strategic redirection has been announced

These are classic situations where the natural response is: head down, eye-on-the-ball and hope I can score (or at any rate, survive in the team). The list isn’t exhaustive, but it’s a fair diagnostic guide and the treatment defies the usual training solutions, because it’s about perception rather than skill, and about the individual being helped to recognise the problems rather than being handed the solutions.

There is one process that we have found highly effective in these essentially very personal areas of development, and that is mentoring.

Mentoring in the workplace is not of course a new idea. In one form or another it’s standard practice in many organisations. But it is also often overlooked as an option, sometimes seen as rather old-fashioned, and regarded as too broad brush (and a somewhat soft brush at that), when in fact properly used it is the most practical and precise of instruments. That is because in a good mentoring programme neither mentor nor mentee has any preconceptions about the outcomes. These emerge from the dialogue between the two, structured and agreed by them, in ways that ensure they are capable of definition, implementation and monitoring.


‘Mentoring is essentially about trust and exchange’

The word mentor means ‘faithful advisor’. Mentoring is essentially about trust and exchange. The mentor is not there to coach or instruct but to listen, prompt and advise from his or her own experience.

It’s not therapy and it’s not coaching. It’s a structured process whereby someone with problems unresolved or opportunities unrealised can be helped to understand them in a wider and more informed way by tapping in to the wisdom and experience of a mentor. A good mentor will above all help the individual to lift his eyes, re-focus on the whole field of play, and move on as part of something bigger – to become a head-up player.

But without four key conditions no mentoring programme can achieve this result. Those conditions are:

- organisation-wide commitment to the principle
- meticulous briefing of mentees and their line managers
- total trust between mentor, mentee and line manager
- unquestionable quality of mentors

With those four legs in place, a mentoring process can be designed for any organisation that will energise the parts that no other type of training can reach. 

At Jo Ouston & Co we design and implement mentoring schemes to be run in-house or using our team of experienced external mentors – see www.joouston.co.uk and click on ‘One-to-one’.

Survive and Prosper



Richard Quine and Barbara Houseman look at emotionally intelligent ways to deal with our own anxiety and inspire others in stressful times.



Fear provokes a physical response – the primitive fight/flight reaction that hijacks the higher mental processes. In this state, we retreat into our own space to protect ourselves, we narrow our focus and lose our peripheral vision. What is to be done? We must start with Self.

Self Awareness

- Understand our reactions to fear – mental, physical, behavioural.
- Give ourselves empathy – understand our own values and how these are challenged by the situation.
- Recognise when we are taking things too personally which may distort our reading of situations.
- Recognise how our behaviour changes under stress.

Self Management

- Step back and pause for thought before reacting to adverse stimuli.
- Recognise patterns of tension and use breathing and relaxation to control physical responses.
- Keep personal space out to see things from a wider perspective – less personally, with our wits about us and seeing the wood from the trees.

Social Awareness

- Be aware of others – observe shifts in their behaviour, notice what calms them, what lights the fuse.
- Listen effectively – what are their values and needs.
- Understand the connection between shock and fear in others and how this can create the same in us. Don't let a vicious circle get started.

Relationship Management

- Give status to the needs and values of others. Talk about issues with reference to those needs.
- Keep the space out and see the current difficulties in a wider context with a perspective that embraces the future and new possibilities.
- Work on your physical presence – speak up and carry conviction as a leader, inspire confidence in others.

Practice News

New Jo Ouston & Co Website

We have just recently launched a new JO & Co website. This is designed to provide better information about our courses and services and can be found at the usual address – www.joouston.co.uk. We hope that you will find it helpful.

Course Schedule

The schedule of our open courses to mid-2009 has now been published and a hard copy has been circulated with this edition of JOurnal. The schedule may change during the year as new course dates are added. The latest version is always available on the website or give us a ring on 020 7821 8299

Mailing Addresses

If your address needs amendment or if you would prefer to receive the JOurnal at a different address – e.g. home – please amend and return the mailing envelope or just drop us a line.

Similarly, if you would prefer to receive the JOurnal by e-mail, please send an e-mail to let us know to info@joouston.co.uk.


Investor in People

Jo Ouston & Co achieved accreditation as an Investor in People in January 2008.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Emotionally intelligent awareness enables us to respond more appropriately. We are less likely to take things personally if we can see the need behind people's behaviour in difficult situations. By being more objective, we can better manage our own reactions and find better ways of doing things.

Paying attention to others takes us out of ourselves. We are able to respond more creatively and to be a steadying influence. 



Career and management development consultants

Jo Ouston & Company Limited
Lower Ground Floor Nelson House Dolphin Square London SW1V 3NY
Tel 020 7821 8299 Fax 020 7798 5743 e-mail info@joouston.co.uk
www.joouston.co.uk