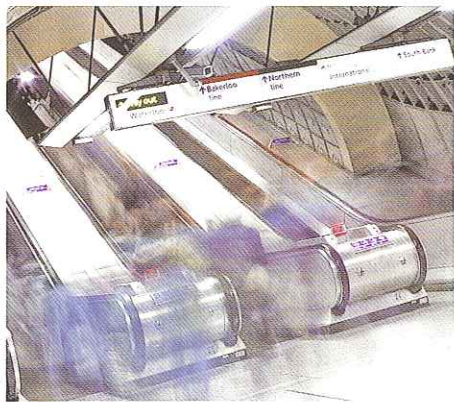


# Leading the way in *troubled times*



*Karen Cariss, CEO of PageUp People gives an overview of the challenges leaders face in the wake of the global financial crisis, and ways they can 'step up to the plate' in tough market conditions.*

## What are the key challenges for leaders in 2009?

**T**he first – and biggest – risk leaders must contend with is delivering on their business goals. The current crisis is forcing companies to take a short term focus, but it is imperative they retain a balance between managing operational responsibilities and more strategic imperatives. Effectively they want to move forward but not in a way that puts the business at risk.

Another major challenge is retaining key talent. All of a sudden we're finding that everyone wants to talk about succession management. The current crisis has really given this impetus. HR managers are being asked, "How do we accelerate leaders throughout our organisation? What are the promotion paths? How do we identify critical talent and flight risk?" There's a real

trend away from a replacement mentality to promoting and maximising talent from within. Organisations are realising there is a rich vein of internal talent they should be tapping into – rather than losing it.

Usually the first casualty in a recession is headcount. What should leaders do to manage issues around job losses?

Where job cuts are concerned, communication is critical. If staff are informed about what's going on and decisions are clearly explained, they can get their head around it more easily. It also helps prevent the spread of destructive and destabilising rumours.

How organisations communicate these messages is just as important as what they're communicating. Leaders need to communicate clear messages that are easily understood. Where possible, leaders

should use face to face communication or videoconferencing – email and newsletters are not what anxious employees want to see. Through human interaction, staff can not only digest the words being said, but also read the accompanying body language, which makes the message more sincere and believable.

What steps should leaders take to navigate their organisation through difficult times?

The global political response to the financial crisis provides an interesting study in the characteristics of strong leadership. It's a microcosm of what's happening in the corporate world. The world's political leaders are showing calm in the face of chaos, but also being firm and decisive. They are listening but are prepared to act and make some hard decisions.

**Many leaders are returning to a workplace with a heightened level of anxiety and fear. Staff are worried about losing their jobs, failing to meet targets, or being distracted by rumours and innuendo. In a nervous climate leaders should:**

1. **Be calm and considered.** Staff want stability and leaders who are decisive and in control.
2. **Show sincerity and honesty.** It is best to be honest about what lies ahead. In anxious times, people's antenna become much more sensitive and alert to the difference between truth and fabrication.
3. **Elevate the level and frequency of communication.** Leaders can't communicate enough in an environment like this. In times of anxiety, people are hungry for knowledge. Even if it is not good news, psychologically staff can deal with it better if

they understand the position the business is in, and can adapt their mindset.

4. **Communicate the basics often.** Where's the business at? Where are we going? Why are we taking this approach? How are we going to get there? With so much complexity going on around them, staff want clarity and simplicity.

5. **Retain a strategic lens on the current environment.** Leaders mustn't lose sight of the big picture. The current scenario might have changed, but the business goals haven't. They should remind themselves it's

not just about today or next week, but next year and beyond.

6. **Be true to the values of the organisation.** In tough times company values really get tested. Having a strong set of values for staff to lock onto through difficult periods is precisely why they're created.

7. **Help the organisation stay focused.** Leaders need to have a line of sight of where the business is heading for staff to focus on. They need to be specific about the role everyone has to play, and what the business requires of them right now.