

Whale or Wave

Managing yourself in uncertainty

Spring is in the air. Government legislatures are alive and debating, budgets are being finalized and presented, taxes are being filed. We're well into actioning our business plans and objectives for 2009. It's a high energy time.

Yet if you're one of the many leaders dealing with potential reorganizations, staff 'realigning' or program restructuring – just to pick a few – it can become tricky to keep everyone on course. Especially if you're looking starboard and you strongly suspect there's a large unidentifiable object moving directly toward your bow.

Which reminds me of a story. Last July, I enjoyed a family vacation just outside of St. John's, Newfoundland. We stayed at a lovely beach house with a view looking across to Bell Island. The food fishery was open and the whales were competing for the day's catch. From morning till dusk we were treated to a show of minke whales spouting their tall streams of vapour before diving back beneath the surface. It was great entertainment. It was also addictive. I found I couldn't help but have one eye on the horizon, scanning for the next whale. And I was distracted even more by the dark waves posing as pretty convincing whale look-a-likes.

I've a hunch that there are many employees out there feeling a similar confusion and unease about not being able to clearly name what they are seeing. We're living in uncertain times. Many employees are worried about their future. And they need something tangible to hold on to. As a leader, there is no better time than now to get comfortable and confident with how you effectively lead your team through uncertainty.

You need to get comfortable hanging out in the grey zone. Tune in to how you react in situations where you are uncomfortable and don't know all of the answers. Do you withdraw? Start talking fast? Become sarcastic? Crack jokes? We all have a place we go when we're entering a grey zone. But as leaders, your employees need you to be the steady rudder steering the ship.

You need to name the elephant in the room before you can focus everyone's attention on the possibilities

for moving forward. You might think it's better to wait until you have the whole picture. But while you wait, your employees are busy making assumptions, filling in the gaps and coming up with their own interpretations. Energy that could be spent on meaningful work instead idles away in the land of what-ifs and maybes.


Mary Beth O'Neill in *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* suggests the following steps to help reground yourself and manage through the uncertainty:

- Acknowledge the ambiguity.
- Distinguish for yourself where you are clear and where you are unclear about the situation. (ie. What do you think, feel and want to do before you tell others).
- Articulate to others the boundary of your clarity and your lack of clarity.
- Say what it is you want to do, given the situation.
- Tell others what you need from them.
- And pay attention to your level of reactivity. Remember, they're looking to you for consistency.

Leading in the grey zone, although not always fun, is a real opportunity to strengthen your leadership presence. Because the more you identify your reactivity and develop personal strategies

to shift back to how you want to be seen as a leader, the more effective you will be – and the more confident you'll be steering clear of the whales.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are your top three values?
2. How are your actions, words and contributions in line with what you value?
3. What are three adjectives you would want your colleagues to use in describing your 'presence'?
4. When there's conflict or uncertainty in conversations, how do you typically react?
5. When you find yourself moving into a reactive mode, what are your cues? (ie. heart speeds up, face feels red, start to use sarcasm, withdraws)
6. How can you use those cues as a signal to transition back to how you want to be seen? 



Karen Kelloway

Karen Kelloway is a certified executive coach trained through Royal Roads University. Karen works with motivated, committed professionals to help them reach new heights in their working lives. Her coaching program, NAIL IT: Six Steps to Your Ideal Workplace© can help invigorate and inspire the performance of all members of your team. The series is offered as a tele-class as well as customized group coaching sessions. For more information on her individual and group coaching, visit kellowaycoaching.com, email Karen@kellowaycoaching.com or call 902-444-3985. The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of *Atlantic Business Magazine*.