Breakthrough Leadership

By Wayne Baker

Extraordinary events—positive or negative—are temporary openings for breakthroughs in personal growth, organizational development, and human progress. Breakthrough leaders seize these moments to explore a world of new possibilities for themselves, for their organizations, for society.

1. People need to believe. The primary motivation in life is the search for meaning and purpose. Humans have a will to meaning. Human beings, says Charlotte Bühler, live “with intentionality, which means living with purpose. The purpose is to give meaning to life...” We cannot live without beliefs.

2. People need to belong. The need to belong is a potent human force that finds expression in personal relationships, work relationships, community involvement, participation in voluntary associations, national pride, patriotism, tribal loyalties and religious allegiances. "Social needs" are powerful motivators—needs "for belonging, for association, for acceptance by one’s fellows, for giving and receiving friendship and love." The need to belong is hard-wired. Indeed, the human brain has a specialized organic ability to perceive social events and human interactions. Belonging has measurable positive effects on subjective well-being, mental and physical health, and the body’s biochemistry.

3. People need to contribute. The reciprocity principle—the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to repay—is universal. It is a principal component of all moral codes. The principle is so fundamental that it defines humanity. The need to contribute to others and to accept contributions from others is hard-wired into us as a species.

4. People seek transcendence. Why do bad (or good) things happen? The need for answers may be especially acute in the face of disaster, but transcendence above the trials and travails of life is an eternal and universal quest. Every culture grapples with the big questions: Why are we here? Where do we come from? Where are we going? The quest for transcendence takes many forms—science, religion, spirituality, philosophy, space exploration, devotion to callings and careers, the inner journey of self-realization, etc. Transcendence is possible in any circumstance. Victims of calamities, disasters or life-threatening events transcend the suffering and sorrow of their experiences by construing meaning in them, using their experiences to enrich their lives and the lives of others. With a higher purpose in life, a person can survive and rise above almost anything.

5. Leaders and institutions (organizations, governments, family, religion, etc.) facilitate or deny the human needs to believe, belong, contribute and seek transcendence. Leaders and institutions facilitate by creating the space, opportunity and resources for the expression of belief, belonging, contribution and transcendence; they deny these by limiting, suppressing or opposing their expression.

Breakthrough leadership is critical for the expression of the human needs for believing, belonging, contributing and transcending—especially in trying times.

1. Extraordinary events—positive or negative—are temporary openings for breakthroughs in personal growth, organizational development and human progress.

   - Extraordinary events are openings for breakthroughs because they suspend beliefs about what is possible and what is not. The world paused in wonder and awe when the first human set foot on the moon; even the war in Biafra was temporarily halted. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon demonstrated that the impossible was possible, shattering the widely held belief in the inviolability of the American homeland.

   - Extraordinary events are temporary openings for breakthroughs because—as hard as it is to imagine at the time—the extraordinary eventually becomes routine. Moonwalks, space stations and space walks now seem ordinary, and rarely even make the front page of the evening paper.
2. A breakthrough leader seizes the temporary openings created by extraordinary events to facilitate the expression of the human needs for believing, belonging, contributing and transcending.

- Organizations often operate as though people leave their beliefs, passions, fears, politics, etc. on the doorstep as they enter a corporate world of rationality, efficiency and reason. Breakthrough leaders recognize this as fiction, and create the space, opportunity and resources for the expression of human needs.

- Facilitating the expression of human needs is empowering and beneficial to the individual, the organization and the larger society. Denying their expression has the opposite effect.

- Anything is possible. Recent events just proved that. Breakthrough leaders use the openings created by extraordinary events to explore a world of new possibilities-for themselves, for their organizations, for society.

Breakthrough leaders are role models in words and deeds of the expression of belief, belonging, contribution and transcendence.

1. Begin with yourself.

- What is your personal "strong idea"? What are your core beliefs, values, aspirations, ideals? How do you live your strong idea?

- How have you personally expressed the need to belong? In trying times, people often re-connect with old friends and family, complete unfinished business in their relationships, go out of their way to be courteous and forgiving, etc.

- How have you personally responded to the events? What contributions have you made to help others? Have you donated blood, expertise, money, time, emotional support, etc.?

- What is your struggle for transcendence? What is the meaning of the events for you? What fears and hopes do you have? How are your core ideas tested by the extraordinary events? What breakthroughs in personal understanding do you have?

- How will you change your behavior as a result of the events? What will you do personally to make the world a better, safer, more humane place?

2. Use the organization's resources, formal and informal, to respond to the immediate crisis, to develop and strengthen the organization, and to further the organization's long-term contribution to society.

- Your people are waiting to hear from you. Silence is not strength. A strong leader shares openly with others. Start with what you have learned about yourself. Eloquence is not important. What you say—indeed the mere act of trying to say it—will enable and empower others. It frees them to speak what is on their minds and in their hearts.

- Extraordinary events call for more than a token acknowledgement.

- Your people are already talking about the events and their meaning. Create the space and opportunity for conversation, such as community town halls, discussion groups, chat rooms, etc.

- Disasters activate and heighten the human need to contribute to others. The outpouring of help and assistance of all kinds in the wake of the terrorist attacks is testimony to it. People become frustrated and feel powerless when they can't do something in response. (See "A story from a New Yorker close to Ground Zero.")

A Story From a New Yorker Close to Ground Zero

"On the 11th, we went to donate blood and found long lines of people who were waiting to donate blood, but no one was actually available to draw blood from the donors. The Red Cross is now saying that they have enough blood in inventory that they cannot store any more. Of course, the blood supply is adequate because few people were injured. There were upward of 20,000 people in the WTC. About three-fourths of these escaped with minor injuries, about 800 were hospitalized and about 6,000 perished. The rescue teams have found no survivors since the first afternoon.

"Here in Manhattan the problem has been that more people want to help than are needed. On the 12th, someone told me there was a need for people to make sandwiches for the rescue workers. So my wife and I went to make sandwiches. By the time we got there, they already had too many workers. But I got there early enough on the 13th that they let me make sandwiches for one hour. Then they asked the first shift to leave so that another shift of sandwich-makers could start. On the 14th, we were allowed to help make 3,000 sandwiches."
• Your people want to contribute, and will do so with or without you. It’s better that they do it with you. Some of the most noble responses to the September 11th tragedy have been grassroots movements. With the power of an organization behind them, your people can do even more.

• Use the organization’s resources to make contributions. This could include setting up relief funds, giving people paid time off for community service, matching monetary contributions made by your people, making your facilities available to relief workers, setting up a company blood bank, etc.

• Use the occasion to discuss (and develop) your organization’s “strong idea.” (Does it have a strong idea, aside from maximizing shareholder wealth? People will exert extraordinary effort in service of a higher cause. Maximizing shareholder wealth is not one of them.)

• It’s no longer business as usual. The typical responses to economic downturns, such as layoffs, only make things worse. Layoffs tell your people, "We don’t care what you believe. You don’t belong here. We don’t want your contribution."

• Seek unusual responses. Make unreasonable requests in service of the greater good. Challenge your people to come up with creative and imaginative alternatives to the usual responses.

• A world of unprecedented possibilities is open—for a moment. Seize it and do something good with it.

• Our responses, individually and collectively, shape the legacy of trying times. How we respond makes a difference. We can respond in ways that make the recent events just another footnote in the seemingly endless human history of savagery, suffering and pain. Or we can respond in ways that become the opening of a new chapter in human evolution.

Examples of "Breakthrough Leadership"

In Gander: The Hospitality of Perfect Strangers

The leaders of Gander, and other cities in Newfoundland, provide an excellent example of "breakthrough leadership." When more than 50 commercial airliners were forced to land on their island on September 11, these leaders capitalized on an extraordinary event to achieve a breakthrough in "organizational development and human progress." They organized their towns to not only house their visitors, but also gave special care to the elderly and the pregnant, kept families and plane passengers together, provided medical services, arranged for phone calls to families, fed them, took them on "excursions" and provided them transportation to the laundromat. The experience not only transformed these towns, but also transformed the passengers, who became friends, exchanged phone numbers to keep in touch and organized scholarship contributions for the children of Gander. For more information, see the following Web site: http://www.ganderairport.com/911.htm

"Concert for New York" Raises Millions for WTC Attack Victims

This article showed numerous examples of outstanding leadership and contribution. First, there was the "Concert for New York" at Madison Square Garden that raised more than $14 million just in ticket sales. The show included Elton John, Melissa Ethridge, Jay-Z, Destiny's Child, Billy Joel, John Mellencamp, David Bowie, The Who, Mick Jagger and Paul McCartney, a line-up hard to match. A two-CD set was also recorded with all proceeds going to the victims of the attack. Washington D.C. also got a turn to remember the victims with a benefit show called "United We Stand: What More Can I Give?" Headliners included The Backstreet Boys, James Brown, Aerosmith, Mariah Carey and Michael Jackson who together raised approximately $2 million dollars. The Country Freedom Festival was marked by themes of perseverance. For more information, please see the following Web site (NOTE: Requires registration for access): http://www.ny1.com/content/top_stories/16711/-concert-for-new-york--raises-millions-for-wtc-attack-victims