



## The way I see it...

BY PAUL KINDINGER

# Great leaders inspire

**M**Y past couple columns have focused on current economic issues and the need for a healthy injection of hope. This month, I want to take that concept one step farther by discussing a few characteristics of “great leaders.” I know books written about this topic. Besides, what qualifies me as an expert in the field?

First, you’re correct: I am not an expert in leadership styles or management theory. But I do have one advantage – it’s called experience and observation. During my career, I have been privileged to associate with many great leaders and managers. Some are with large corporations, small businesses or federal, state and local governments. Some are entrepreneurs, association executives, board members and many others with leadership responsibilities. I have had the opportunity to observe their interactions with employees, customers or even family members. I can state with firm conviction that the most successful among them have several things in common.

The great leaders I have been privileged to talk with and observe almost universally start by gathering information from as many sources as time will permit. They reach out, especially during stressful or challenging times. They then thoroughly analyze that data, seeking clues or answers to the dilemma facing them at the time. They have a child-like curiosity and are not afraid to ask questions and keep probing until they are satisfied with the answers. Others tend to pull in, hide their heads in the sand or pretend the problem doesn’t exist.

Another characteristic I have observed that seems to separate great leaders from good or ordinary leaders is not only their ability to gather and analyze a situation, but do it from completely fresh or unique perspectives. When you listen to their analysis, they often come up with an idea that on the surface seems so obvious and so simple that I sit there with my jaw open saying, why didn’t I think of that? My major professor in graduate school was one of those individuals. By the way, he is credited with inventing *FTD*, the floral delivery service. The basic idea still lives today and yet it was originally thought of in the 1950s. I have also observed many entrepreneurs and business leaders who seem to have a knack for looking at a situation in a completely new or different way.

Perhaps the single biggest factor, in my opinion, that separates great leaders from ordinary leaders is how they portray their vision of the future as one of inspiration and hope. Great leaders have a way of

presenting their concepts or ideas factually, simplistically, honestly and with integrity. Their ideas are devoid of fluff. They are thought provoking, realistic, but most importantly, inspirational. It is as if they are preparing the troops for battle.

Let’s face it – the news today is full of stories that can make me feel anything from grumpy to irritable or just plain depressed. I have been known to refer to the news media as the “Ain’t it awful” club. They make a habit of telling me everything is wrong, the sky is falling and there is no escape. Actually, that is what inspired me to think about how information is presented and its potential impact on individual and company performance. I cannot recall a single time listening to a great leader and walking away feeling depressed or badly about my future. Even when the news is not great, they still inspire people to do their very best. In my mind, that is the very essence of leadership.

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**What about you? Do you inspire others?** We are currently in challenging economic times. This year, 2009, could be more challenging than 2008 for many dealers. So how will you prepare your organization for the possible new realities? What kind of analysis and planning will take place in your business? Will you involve others by reaching out for the input of friends, family, employees, experts, other dealers, manufacturers and others? Most importantly, how will you present your vision? Will it be a message that will inspire, even if it contains some not so great news? Delivering good news is always easier than difficult news, but even bad news can be presented in a manner that can inspire others to do their very best.

Inspire others to do their best and you will be a great leader – and that’s the way I see it. ■

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