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Against All Odds: How Power Leaders Achieve the Impossible *Executive IdeaLink*, February 2010

By: *Stephen Long*

An essential leadership component is the use of power versus authority. Do you know the difference? Leaders who do will position their organizations well for future.

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Growing a business during a recession is the ultimate test of leadership. Many believe that it's impossible, but consider that while the Dow Jones Index plunged more than 40 percent between the fourth quarter of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009, these industries experienced significant growth:

- Movies: 22 percent increase;
- Personal care: 18 percent increase;
- Video games: 14 percent increase.



Growth was not limited to these three industries, however. NetFlix experienced a 26 percent increase in sales, sales of big screen TVs were predicted to increase by 16 percent last year, and smart phones have *doubled* their sales in the past year.

History has proven growth occurs during other tough times. Kellogg's, Proctor & Gamble, and Chevrolet all grew their businesses during the Great Depression to become their respective market leaders. In addition, General Electric, Disney, Hewlett-Packard, and Microsoft were all recession-era start-ups.

As the song goes, the times "they are a changin'." The current recession will shape the business climate for the next generation, and executives who harness and convey their power successfully will position their organizations for the near and distant future. Leaders who wish to grow their businesses under the current economic conditions have two mandates: They must have bold ideas, and they need to act fast. Stakes are higher, and the survivors will get in the game early. Late adaptors will never catch this bus.

Speed and scope are not the only distinguishing leadership factors, however. An essential leadership component is the use of power versus authority. During a stable economy, distinguishing between power leaders and authority leaders can be difficult because executives rarely reveal their authentic nature under favorable conditions. But in uncertain times, they cannot hide their true colors.

Authority leaders rely on their positions to preserve the status quo, whereas power leaders demonstrate their ability to communicate with their workforce and engage with their markets to grow their business. They convince their employees they're able to achieve the impossible and meet market demand even during the most challenging times.

Power leaders distinguish themselves from authority leaders by strengthening relationships with their people and, most importantly, altering their relationship with the current reality. Bottom line, power leaders are better able to lead change, create organizational consistency, and grow their businesses.

The chart below highlights the key differences between leaders who harness their power versus those who rely on their authority.

Power Leaders	Authority Leaders
Focus on change	Focus on complexity
Change the reality	Cling to reality
Assess risks	Avoid risks
Are pragmatists	Are perfectionists

Organizations attempting to achieve the impossible are not doing so as a last ditch effort. Achieving the impossible is not a goal for dysfunctional companies that aspire to mediocrity. It's for strong companies, and power leaders realize you don't have to be sick to get better.

The most important priority for power leaders is recognizing followers won't commit to any initiative through authoritarian means. Executives won't be able to lead change if they apply the same top-down management style that has inhibited and restricted employees for centuries.

What kind of leader are you? How you answer this question will determine how successful your organization will be today and tomorrow.

Dr. Stephen Long is founder and president of [The Institute for Level Six Leadership](#) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Email: doolong@levelsixleadership.com

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☆☆☆☆☆ [Angela Palmier](#), February 18, 2010

Fantastic article Dr. Long. I'm in the process of blogging about this exact topic. There appears to be such a dedication to maintaining what was/is as opposed to what could be, especially in the non-profit world. Maintaining the status quo is a safe way to win the race to the bottom. And blaming the economy for declining membership and profit? A small factor, perhaps-but I'm seeing over and over again that it is the organizations whose leaders are so focused on their authority as opposed to leading that are more likely to blame. "I'm the CEO" was a quote and response a recent client stated when asked why more resources were being poured into a program that was losing money and market share. As a consultant, I realized quickly that there was no advice, no alternative that was going to get through, so I got out. I wish this article was available as a framed print and required to hang on the wall of every CEO! Great work!

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