



Leading Through The Valley of Despair

Like our country, our inner landscape—our unseen emotional life—has come under attack recently. The events of September 11 and those that followed have us all experiencing new, unfamiliar feelings. Like me, you may be sensing, deep within yourself, an ill-defined nervousness or tension—even grief—that leaves you more cautious and more focused on your own welfare. You may also be seeking deeper meaning to sustain you.

This is what it's like to pass through the Valley of Despair.

Typically, we find ourselves in this valley when we lose something dear to us, such as a loved one, a job, our health or our sense of purpose. The loss, as we've learned all too well, can be a collective one, with an entire organization—even a nation—experiencing the same trauma. In this case, the loss is that freedom and security we once knew and can never again take for granted. We're all aware that these calamitous events have changed our lives forever, and that things are not going to return to "normal." It shows in the eyes of everyone we meet.

You may be asking yourself, Is there anything I can do to lead my team and organization through this time? How can I ease their journey through the Valley of Despair? The answer lies not only in the way you lead others, but—and this point is of paramount importance—in **the way you lead yourself**. To lead your team well you must first focus on how you are getting yourself through your own private Valley. Here are six valuable things to do:

1. Start by accepting that you, like everyone else, are in the Valley of Despair, and tell yourself that these feelings are perfectly normal and reasonable. Find someone you can trust, and share with him or her the awful thoughts and leaps of imagination that you have been experiencing. Share your own "damage report" so you can begin reconstruction from your inner "command center." If you are actively working on your own reconstruction, you will be more able to listen to your team members and help them through their own period of reconstruction.
2. Create a quiet place where you can find some peace during the day. Maybe you have one already. Whether this place is for prayer, meditation or just simple physical rest, is up to you. Just keep in mind that your inner injuries will heal better if you occasionally take a peaceful rest. Encourage your team members to take rest time, too. In the accelerated world of business, this is a good practice even in the best of times.

3. This is a good time to begin keeping a journal if you haven't already. Keeping a personal journal helps you to keep track of your thoughts and characterize your journey in your own words. Reading your journal at some future date may help you look back and see that moving through the Valley of Despair was a crucial factor in your growth as a leader.
4. Dig out that old mission statement or credo you prepared and presented months ago and read it again. Get clear in your own mind what you and your organization's purpose really is. and start talking about it. Can you remember the reason that your team exists—what you are all trying to achieve? Once you have refreshed and clarified your original purpose for yourself, send it as an email to the organization or use it as an introduction at a management meeting. Whether you communicate this purpose, this hope for the future, to one person or to one thousand doesn't really matter. What's important is making it live again.
5. This is extremely effective: Experience some early successes by moving your strategic horizon towards the present. If you are used to planning quarterly, plan by the month for the next quarter. if you normally plan monthly, now do it weekly. In your own mind, create clear, early, achievable milestones, then communicate these milestones just as clearly to your team. Focus everyone towards achieving them. Don't let your people sit in the Valley of Despair without achievements to be proud of and to celebrate. The journey through the Valley seems easier when the steps are shorter.
6. Get personally involved in the day-to-day activity of the business. The closer you get to the your customer, the more nourishment you will derive from seeing that your purpose is being achieved. Don't try to make the decisions for your team, just get more involved in the details of the work. As you get more involved, you'll discover ways to involve your team more, as well. This is a great time to be visibly involved in things and leading by example. Your self-confidence will be infectious.

Will you emerge from the Valley of Despair? Of course. Will things on the other side be the same as they once were? Definitely not. You will have grown.

And what is that vision you see in the mist, beyond the Valley of Despair? It's another important stop on your leadership journey. You are seeing the Mountains of Hope, drawing you nearer and beckoning you to be the great leader you know you can be.

Keep going!

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