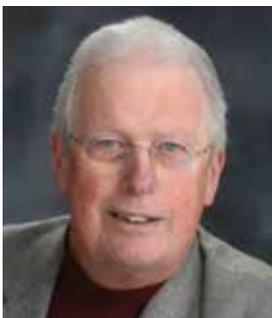


# EMERGE Stronger

How to use your attitude, value and talent to prosper during difficult circumstances

## The 20+ years of economic expansion through 2007

left many companies and individuals unprepared to manage a downturn, as evidenced by the last few years. While business veterans may find it surprising, many of today's business leaders have not experienced a significant economic downturn in their career before recently, and therefore find themselves searching for strategies to help weather this storm. Too many companies and individuals chose to batten down the hatches. That may have been their first mistake. These challenging circumstances present real opportunities today and provide the foundation for success in the future.



**By Patrick T. Malone**

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The key to capturing them is found in your attitude, the value you bring and your talent.

### Key ingredients

Over the last five years, the economists have been hard at work predicting the start of a recovery. Depending on who you are listening to, it will come in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th quarter of this fiscal year or the next. Depending on your degree of optimism, you have selected one of the above. What if you are wrong? Do you find yourself expanding your optimism to the next quarter?



This is where your attitude can help. Admiral James Stockdale was the highest-ranking U.S. military officer in the Hanoi prison camp during the Vietnam War. In his book *In Love and War*, he described the attitude that helped him survive his 8-year imprisonment while many others did not survive theirs. What is now known as the "Stockdale Paradox" in psychological circles is simply an absolute faith that you will prevail in the end, coupled with the discipline to confront the sometimes brutal facts of your current reality.

An article by Jim Collins in *USA TODAY* connected this paradox with a business lesson on why some companies are able to rise from difficulty to become great, while others emerge from those same exact difficulties weakened and dispirited. The survivors had an absolute belief that, in the future, they would survive the experience and be stronger for it. However, in the moment, they confronted their difficult reality as if it were likely to exist for an infinite time period with no light at the end of the tunnel. They used the grim reality of the moment to change their business model in order to prosper now.

The grim reality of our difficult economy over the last few years brings us to the second key – value. The companies and individuals most likely to emerge stronger are those who are willing to provide more value

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now. Manufacturers usually identify a series of values that their products and/or promotions are capable of delivering. Many of my clients tell me their customers don't understand their value proposition. Upon investigation, I have found the reality is these clients didn't know what their customer valued. In fact, many of these clients didn't even understand what their own people valued. So, it becomes the role of the distributor rep to take the generic values determined by the manufacturer and customize them to their customer.



We cannot create value in a vacuum. We look at our products and services and decide that they provide great value and then attempt to go out and sell our value. The problem is what we perceive as value may not be what our customers perceive as value. At no other time than now has it been more important to find out what our customers value and adjust accordingly. For example, our existing and potential customers have told us time is more important than money. Our adjustment has been a blended approach with an e-learning virtual classroom, plus the traditional hands-on workshop in 33 percent less time. The response was beyond our expectations.

The right attitude combined with a great value proposition will still not ensure your success in difficult times. The final and most important ingredient is your talent – the absolute skill to execute well at will. As a distributor sales rep you have two choices: become satisfied with your current level of skill, or adopt a continuous improvement program that challenges your competency.

It is easy to become complacent and satisfied with our current level of skill, especially if you are reasonably successful. However, our industry continues to change. What was excellent yesterday, is merely good today, and will be mediocre tomorrow. So I come down on the side of continuous improvement.

Building talent from within requires a more disciplined approach, but in the long haul I believe the results pay a bigger dividend. I ask others who are successful how they handle different situations. When I was in front-line sales, every veteran rep was my coach. Every sales manager

was my source for becoming a better manager. Even today, other business owners and executives become a model for me to improve my competency.

The difference now is the adjustments are more subtle than extensive. A word, an inflection, a tone can all impact the outcome of a sales interaction, so I concentrate on the little things. I have always believed in the philosophy that when you stop growing, you begin to die.

In any event, business history is replete with organizations and individuals that have grown and prospered in difficult times. So can you, if you remember your attitude, the value you bring and your talent. ■