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## What Successful Leaders Need To Do In Turbulent Times

*The Entrepreneur*

By Marc Kramer, For The Bulletin

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Neil Ducoff is the author of *No-Compromise Leadership: A Higher Standard of Leadership Thinking & Behavior* and the founder and CEO of Strategies, a business training and coaching company based in Connecticut. I interviewed Mr. Ducoff because I thought his book was an excellent read for the type of leaders we need today.

In addition to dedicating almost 40 years to coaching leaders at such major companies across the U.S., Canada and Taiwan as Gillette, Aveda and Matrix, Mr. Ducoff has been a featured speaker at the annual National Gathering of Games conference, presented by Jack Stack's *The Great Game of Business*, over the past five years. He was honored as a "business icon" at the annual *Serious Business: Legends & Icons* conference in 2006 and was the recipient of the 2005 Art of Business Award. The following is an interview with Mr. Ducoff.

**Kramer:** What do you mean by "No Compromise Leadership"?

**Ducoff:** [As he defines the term in a press release,] No-Compromise Leadership is about the thinking, behavior and accountability that support all leadership outcomes. Joined together, these two simple words immediately establish a higher standard of thinking and behavior — becoming a powerful internal compass that keeps business leaders and their companies steadfastly on course. By design, No-Compromise cuts through the excuses, emotional blockages and procrastination that infect leadership performance. When No-Compromise becomes your mandate — the guiding principle upon which all other leadership behavior emanates — the outcomes will be nothing short of [a] breakthrough.

More than a business philosophy, No-Compromise Leadership is a business/leadership model that produces measurable results, including increased sales and decreased costs; consistency throughout the company; and increased customer loyalty and retention. Leaders and employees will both be more engaged in growth — feeling empowered because they've been empowered. And that kind of empowerment translates to greater job satisfaction and staff retention; an ability to conduct business better, faster and more efficiently; and even enables change in initiatives to move smoothly without the once-common internal resistance.

No Compromise is not a leadership style void of compassion. When I do a presentation on No-Compromise, someone always seems to say something like, "No-Compromise sounds like I have to become a Marine drill sergeant." The discussion conjures up images of dictating leaders who hone their ability to shout commands and to say "no" to just about every request. Becoming a No-Compromise leader doesn't mean that you must become an imposing messenger of darkness who demands unquestioned, unrelenting and absolute obedience. Frankly, anyone flipping to the drill-sergeant style of leadership would likely find stacks of resignations on his or her desk. Count on my resignation to be the first.

**Kramer:** The economy is going through one of its roughest patches in half a century. What type of leaders do we need right now?

**Ducoff:** Americans are paying the hefty price of leadership compromise — by our elected officials, banking and financial institutions, oil companies, automakers and Wall Street itself. With millions out of work, and the crisis showing no signs of letting up, what can business leaders and owners — whether of large corporations or small mom-and-pop enterprises — do to save their companies and survive?

In this new, challenging landscape, taking any company (or government) to the highest level of success and profitability while creating a positive, rewarding workplace environment will require a game-changing paradigm shift. No-Compromise Leadership can make the difference between championing a successful, profitable and meaningful company that matters to its customers and its team, from one that is contaminated by compromise. Given this, is “No-Compromise” the new American keyword? I believe the answer is YES!

What is compromise? It is a mode of thinking and behavior. Compromise occurs when leaders see and even acknowledge that a problem exists, but fail to engage or, at best, take the easier path of self-interest. And that is what we’ve been seeing around us, every day. Until now! At this historic juncture, new President Barack Obama speaks of the need for a new sense of responsibility and accountability by all Americans, as we begin to make our way back to financial and societal health.

**Kramer:** What types of skills do today’s leaders need to succeed?

**Ducoff:** First, leaders need to be extraordinarily self-aware of what their actions, demeanor, words and attitude are communicating to those around them. Everything coming from the leader speaks volumes about the current state of the company — and its ability to navigate through this recession unscathed. Simply put, people are on edge from the constant barrage of bad news. It’s the leader who establishes hope and optimism that good times will return. It’s the leader who must communicate tough decisions with clarity. It’s the leader who must protect the culture of the company.

Second, in Part Two of my book, I present “The Four Business Outcomes.” The outcomes are: Productivity, Profitability, Staff Retention and Customer Loyalty. Today, leaders need to maintain balance in all four outcomes. To do that, they must master what I call “The BIG Eight Drivers.”

1. Culture: The collective behavior of the company
2. Sense of urgency: The energy that drives performance and growth
3. Critical numbers: Numbers that, if changed, have a profound impact on the company
4. Information flow: Top down, bottom up — everyone knows the score
5. Teamwork: The heartbeat of the company that gets the job done
6. Innovation: Stay out of the box. Do it better, faster, cheaper
7. Systems: The procedures and structure to produce the right results

## 8. Accountability: Delivering what was promised — when it is promised

The economy has erased the margin for error in business. Small mistakes, failure to act decisively and failure to recognize potential hazards can throw even the best companies into a crisis. Leaders need to master and use the drivers to maintain balance in The Four Business Outcomes. This is non-negotiable.

**Kramer:** In your opinion, who are the best CEOs out there right now and what makes them good?

**Ducoff:** Today's economy has presented leaders with unprecedented challenges. I really can't name one specific CEO because even today's best are being put to the test. I believe that books will be written about the leaders that lead their companies through this recession. These leaders will set new standards, strategies, systems and leadership styles that will define what it takes to succeed in the toughest times. I believe they will all be worthy of the title "No-Compromise leader."

**Kramer:** Are leaders born or can someone learn to be a good leader?

**Ducoff:** I believe that there are certainly natural-born leaders that possess those unique traits that inspire and bring out the full potential in those they lead. However, I also believe that someone can learn to be a good leader ... perhaps even become a great leader. The determination and willingness of an individual to develop leadership skills can produce a great leader. And when someone "works" to improve as a leader, there's an authenticity that some natural-born leaders just don't have.

**Kramer:** What are the keys to being a good "No-Compromise Leader"?

**Ducoff:** Becoming a No-Compromise Leader is truly a road less traveled. Not because it's especially long or difficult, but because of the unwavering commitment and perseverance it takes to be such a leader. But at the end of the day, for American businesses to not only survive, but thrive, demands just that level of focus and dedication.

Here are my TEN Tenets of No-Compromise Leadership. Without adhering to all 10, No-Compromise Leadership is a pipe dream.

Clarity: Have absolute clarity on where you're taking your company.

Values: If you want them, live them.

Accountability: Get it done.

Transparent: No excuses when you compromise. Own it.

Culture: Don't destroy from within.

Unity: Don't be dictatorial and inflexible.

Focus: Stay engaged and connected to the action.

Strategic: Manage what's on your plate.

**Resolute:** Be tenacious and courageous.

**Inspiring:** You can't lead without passion.

**Kramer:** What will leaders of sick companies like the auto companies and banks need to do to rebuild trust with employees and customers?

**Duoff:** In recent months, I've been referring to the recession as a new and more complicated jigsaw puzzle that leaders need to figure out — and just to keep it interesting, the puzzle is picture-side down. I've also been encouraging leaders to get clarity on what they want their company to look like on the other side of this recession. The message is simple: Change, adapt and fix what isn't working. Everything is on the table and subject to the "if it's not creating lift, it's creating drag" acid test. No-Compromise Leaders are ridding their companies of drag — and they're doing it quickly.

The only upside to the recession is that it has everyone's attention. People understand the uncertainty of these times. They get it that tough decisions — unpopular decisions — must be made for the companies they work for to make it safely and strong to the other side of the recession. A little sacrifice today to ensure a secure tomorrow is the rule of the day.

The recession has certainly thrown open the window for positive change. More importantly, to fix all of those problems, issues, behaviors, practices and out-of-control "entitlements" that have been waiting to be fixed.

For sick companies, it's time to confront the elephant in the living room because you won't make it through this recession dragging that elephant along.

Here's one of my Neilisms from the book that is so right for these times: "No Compromise has only one setting — whatever it takes."

**Kramer:** Is corporate culture just a buzzword or is it real that someone can develop?

**Duoff:** Creating, reinforcing, nurturing and protecting the culture of any business or corporation is the sole accountability of the leader. It's the culture that customers come in contact with in how they're treated, what their experience is like doing business with the company — and directly impacts their decision to do business with the company again. It's the culture that attracts and retains the best talent. It's the culture that sets the bar at the highest rung for productivity, efficiency, loyalty, revenue growth, cost containment — and profitability. It's the culture that inspires innovation. It's the culture that is adaptable to change and resilient enough to work through challenges. It's the culture of the company that will sustain it through this recession. So ... is corporate culture a buzzword? Heck no. And if leaders aren't paying attention to their cultures today, they're going to find the road through this recession full of roadblocks, dead ends — and minefields.

**Kramer:** How do you build a winning culture, especially in stressful times?

**Duoff:** Openness, transparency, respect, compassion — TRUST. Winning cultures are open cultures. Everyone knows the score. Everyone is engaged. Double standards don't exist. Entitlement thinking and behavior is eradicated. Most of all, everyone is part of the effort to protect the integrity and security of the company or business. When people are actively engaged in the process and understand that their individual efforts make a

difference, something dynamic and special occurs in a culture.

**Kramer:** What corporate cultures [that] most people are familiar with do you think are most likely to survive this financial turmoil?

**Ducoff:** Companies entering this recession with contaminated cultures led by compromising leaders are going to struggle. Better times tolerated and disguised their mediocrity. In tough times, they're sitting ducks. In contrast, disciplined and open cultures have the unique advantage of having high trust and the ability to quickly adapt. Add a high sense of urgency to this mix and you have a culture capable of pushing its way through tough times. Distrust, fear and apathy will crush a company in today's environment.

*Marc Kramer, who is the author of five books and project faculty at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, is a serial entrepreneur.*

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