

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several hands reaching towards a soccer ball in the center. The hands are of various skin tones and are positioned around the ball, suggesting a team effort or a shared goal. The background is a clear, bright blue sky. The entire image is framed by a thick red border.

SEIZING THE FUTURE

PRAESTA

LEADERS IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

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PRAESTA

Praesta is dedicated to building the capability of the leaders, boards and top teams we work with. Our job is to help them succeed. We apply our skill and expertise to the individual's circumstances, work hard to understand our clients' agendas and design our contribution accordingly. This publication draws from the experience of our clients across many organisations and situations. The booklet is designed to help you make the most of the new realities.

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SEIZING THE FUTURE

Seizing the future demands an upbeat and assertive approach coupled with realism, humility and the confidence to lead by example. It involves standing back, re-evaluating and being liberated from those previous frames of reference that constrain. The most successful leaders do this while remaining true to clear guiding values.

In *Riding the Rapids*, published in 2008, we explored the strategies that our clients across the private, public and 'third' sectors were using to navigate their ways through the turmoil and uncertainty created by the financial crisis.

In this booklet, we highlight what we are observing in our work with senior executives about what is required to be successful in the future. Whether the future holds continued focus, renewed growth, painful restructuring or complete reappraisal, it needs to be faced up to and addressed successfully. It will almost certainly require adjusting the skills, competencies, attitudes and sometimes emotions that delivered survival or success in the recent past.

FIVE KEY SKILLS

Our conversations with senior leaders suggest that seizing the future successfully, requires five key skills;

- 1. Accept new reality,**
- 2. Promote fresh thinking,**
- 3. Ensure effective engagement,**
- 4. Embrace radical approaches, and**
- 5. Pace your energies.**



1. ACCEPT NEW REALITY

Economic growth will be re-established at some stage, but looks likely to be modest. Therefore managing and leading organisations in all sectors will be intellectually demanding, physically tough and emotionally stretching over the next few years. Adopting a siege mentality and keeping your head down is unlikely to work.

The impact will vary by sector

- In the **private sector**, companies are likely to experience only limited top line growth. Achieving acceptable results will require continued improvements in what is offered to customers at the same time as further increases in efficiencies and, probably, sector restructuring and consolidation.
- In the **public sector**, expectations from both the public and politicians will continue to grow. At the same time the pressure is on to reduce headcount. Leaders have no option but to view reduced resourcing as an opportunity to take a completely fresh look at the ways services are delivered.
- The **third sector** looks set to face a significant squeeze on revenues, but may well find its role and services are welcomed even more as Government looks for innovative solutions to providing public services. Leaders in this sector will want to address where it is appropriate and feasible for their organisations to take up new roles.

The **opportunities are always there**: you have to focus on where they are likely to be and get ahead of the competition. Less resource forces difficult questions to be asked. Those who bring insight and perspective and can spot trends and discontinuities will be in a strong position to innovate and may receive a more receptive audience than ever before.

We observe that there are three important initial steps – accepting change, calibrating the gap between the old and the new, and allowing yourself a touch of excitement.

- a) **Accepting that conditions have changed and letting go of the past** is the first step towards making the most of future opportunities. Embracing this new reality might start with recognising that the past has gone and adjusting emotionally to what has been ‘lost’. It means standing back and seeing the journey to date and working out how to deal with obstacles that are now in the way.
- b) **Calibrating the gap between the old and the new** means being ruthlessly honest about where you are now and the degree of challenge. It can involve acknowledging that parts of the organisation are in trouble and that you, as a leader, do not have clarity about the way forward. The new reality is likely to be more demanding and will require leaders and managers, more than ever, to create and drive success for themselves and their own organisations.
- c) **Allowing yourself to feel a touch of excitement by the new landscape.** You may feel daunted or dejected but the new reality can include opportunities, if you adjust the lens you are using to assess it. New vistas you never thought possible will open up. You can feel a new sense of liberation and be source of energy to those around you.

Public Sector: an example

Two Government Departments learned that a Ministerial reshuffle would result in them being merged. This was at first difficult for many people to accept, as they had worked hard to build their own brand with staff and with stakeholders. Many of them now found their jobs at risk.

The leadership could not change the new reality, but they could help people to come to terms with it. They called open meetings where they could share what they knew, and paint a picture for the future. They promised further open conversations. They explained how staff would be supported with their personal concerns, but then encouraged everyone to think about the contribution they could make to building the new organisation. People found new energy by concentrating on what they could control and influence, rather than dwelling on what had happened.



2. PROMOTE FRESH THINKING

Promoting freshness of thinking is about being open, discerning, reflective, and liberated, while not devaluing what has gone before. It is accepting that life has moved on and that you take with you your values, experiences and insights into the new landscape.

Freshness of thinking only begins in earnest when you acknowledge what you are feeling about the future. If you are feeling constrained, fresh thinking will not get much of a look in. If you are feeling open minded, fresh ideas can flow in. How willing are you to step inside a bigger landscape and see the world differently?

As you look through the perspectives of different protagonists for fresh thinking, you may find yourself more open to and engaged with new approaches. Freshness of thinking flows from allowing space for reflection, and then moving beyond introspection to wider engagement with different ideas and approaches.

Our clients' experience is that the key components needed for releasing freshness of thinking include: facing up to the reality of the facts and trends, consciously moving your thinking into another place so you are not harking back to a previous era, recognising and removing inhibitors to your thinking and releasing energy in yourself and others. It involves sometimes following your intuitive thinking and not always being entirely logical!

Promoting freshness of thinking: some ideas

- recollect when you do fresh thinking well,
- identify the intellectual, personal or emotional baggage,
- simplify the data to key facts and trends,
- look at others' perspectives as a way of freshening your own,
- spend time with those people who stimulate fresh thinking in you,
- support others around you as they renew their ways of thinking,
- consider other people's motivations and how they can be aligned,
- learn from people from different cultures and age groups,
- follow your intuition and respect the insights it brings, and
- set aside time for reflective thinking.

Universities: Third Sector

In anticipation of major changes in their sector, a Vice Chancellor commissioned three separate organisations to imagine future scenarios from a socioeconomic perspective, a customer perspective and a technology perspective.

These scenarios were used to engage new thinking by the executive team and a cross section of staff with the presentations conducted off-site. By engaging these different groups in different ways and challenging them to think radically – a more innovative and flexible strategic plan was created and the level of engagement with ‘unknown’ futures had begun.



3. ENSURE EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Effective engagement with others – teams, groups, boards, customers, clients, suppliers, competitors – is often sidelined in importance at times of change and uncertainty. We can so easily convince ourselves that there is not time, or that engagement needs to wait until the picture is clearer. Ironically, effective engagement is even more important at these times.

From the experience of the senior leaders we talk to, engagement that works involves; **relationships based on trust, effective listening, common purpose, shared endeavour, and emotional self-awareness.**

Creative debate within **relationships based on trust** is critical, so that purposeful dialogue can release new ideas and not be

destructive. Inter departmental battles, individual power struggles and blame cultures will kill trust. At all levels, trust cannot be taken for granted. It needs regular attention and investment of time, energy and emotion.

Building trust requires being genuinely committed to understanding where others are coming from and what success looks like for them. At the same time recognising who you can trust is important. Sometimes there is limited basis for trust and all you can do is listen hard and try to have reasonable conversations.

Our clients tell us that they are constantly reminded about the importance of **effective listening** to those with an interest at any level, while not being sucked into narrow team, or departmental perspectives. Success comes through bringing a quality of listening that is both “full on”, discerning and discriminating. It is bringing undivided attention and seeing the wider picture at the same time.

Effective partnerships with good quality engagement flow from building shared agendas and a sense of **common purpose** right across the organisation. Some colleagues may tend to build or reinforce barriers in periods of change. Partnerships where feedback can be given and received openly and sensitively are far more likely to survive, thrive and create shared success in times of change.

Senior leaders tell us that committed and flexible groups where individuals are dedicated to both the **shared endeavour** and each other’s success are central to good quality engagement. Teams which have limited professional and personal engagement will rarely provide the leadership necessary to grasp the future effectively.

The team that knows what each person brings and how and when its members engage effectively together will have a measure of robustness which will enable it to keep its resolve in tough times.

This may involve re-examining the purpose of teams as many teams perceive that they in reality have limited operational or professional shared interests. Recognising the reality and redefining what a team is there to do can be liberating and energising.

Individual leaders tell us about the importance of **emotional self-awareness** and understanding when their personal feelings are getting in the way and inhibiting effective engagement, be they emotions of apprehension, frustration, fear or tiredness.

Ensuring effective engagement: some ideas

- build connectivity with others – emotionally, as well as intellectually,
- take responsibility for raising the quality of engagement with your peers and with your team,
- encourage honesty and, when required, be challenging in engagement,
- ensure engagement stands the test of time and of disagreements by building and re-establishing trust,
- identify the protagonists who you are least comfortable with and focus on effective engagement,
- practice good quality engagement even when the wider organisation does not seem to support it, and
- recognise that the more you look outside yourself and mentor and encourage others, the greater will be your sense of personal fulfilment.



4. EMBRACE RADICAL APPROACHES

We observe that the most successful leaders are those who continue to embrace radical approaches. They are open to radical thinking about the way that things are done and will embrace the need to

redesign their own leadership approach and personal aspirations.

Our clients talk about the obligation on leaders to stand back uninhibited by previous models or frames of reference. The strength of resolve to redesign well involves being audacious in understanding others' points of view but not being derailed by fear of upset, uncertainty or ambiguity. Once next steps are clear, the vision behind it needs to be shared with those around you.

Embracing radical change is about taking control of your situation, your energy and your attitude. Many decisions are in the hands of others, but you control decisions about your attitude to the future.

Private Sector: one company's experience

A company with a long and successful history had to face up to falling sales and a credit drought during the downturn. Management had to take action. A wide ranging strategic review led to site closures and the loss of thousands of jobs.

But the company never lost its focus on innovation, and the workforce valued the continued investment in their skills. Shareholders strongly supported a rights issue and accepted a short term loss of dividends. Suppliers appreciated even closer engagement. Overall the company emerged stronger.



5. PACE YOUR ENERGIES

Our consistent observation is that leaders who make the most of opportunities know how to pace and apply their energies skilfully. They are self-aware enough to know that they cannot always be at peak performance and that allocating their energy and time is important.

Drawing from the experience of senior leaders, three steps towards achieving successful pacing of energy include: **build patterns and rhythms that work for you, understand the sources of your resilience, and create 'shafts of stillness'**.

A starting point might be the **rhythms that maximize the vitality and creativity of both your organisation and you.**

Pacing energy involves being acutely conscious of health and well being, and acknowledging the positive and negative aspects of working under pressure. It can mean becoming more ruthless in your use of time and energy. It will mean watching for the danger signals when your spiral of creative energy goes down, and creating situations where the spiral of energy can go up.

Building rhythms that work for you: some ideas

- know the patterns of use of time and energy that work best for you,
- recognise when you are at your most alert to solve difficult problems,
- understand the context when you are at your best at influencing and persuading others,
- watch the consequences of trying to do too many things at once,
- know the best way of not being distracted,
- know the rhythms that help you feel more in control of your own situation and your own creativity,
- be willing and assertive in varying the pace of the day,
- be ruthless in your use of time and energy,
- be conscious when you might go into a downward spiral, and
- recognise the best ways of keeping rhythms that work effectively for you.

Understanding the sources of your resilience, what recharges you and what saps your energy are vital in being able to pace

yourself successfully. The successful leader is nurturing and growing the resilience of themselves and their teams.

Guarding resilience involves:

- a) **recognising when uncertainty can create a sense of threat** and knowing how to handle any darker feelings of doubt, vulnerability or alarm. Some thrive on uncertainty. Others need to be alert to the risk of going into victim mode, and take measures to avoid the self-destructive effect of feeling a victim.
- b) **using your emotions as valuable data** about people and situations, without being captive to the debilitating consequences of crossness, frustration or antipathy.
- c) **training your brain to focus on your priorities** by scheduling blocks of time for different types of work and modes of thinking, and trying not to memorise masses of information and instead focussing on identifying key data and trends.
- d) being conscious of how your own brain works and how you can **work with your preferences** can be very useful in building resilience. It might involve practising noticing your emotions as they arise in order to get better at sensing their presence earlier, or when a strong, difficult emotion is growing refocusing your attention on something else before this emotion takes over or blinds you.
- e) **looking after your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being** as central to ensuring resilience. Whatever gives you energy, can you do more of it? Whatever lifts your spirits is likely to make you more open-minded to different people and their ideas. Knowing the limits of your resilience is crucial as is taking avoiding action to ensure that your reserves do not become depleted.

- f) **being conscious of your own stress levels:** when they are helping you be creative and when they are leading to your becoming unhelpfully defensive, and
- g) **being conscious of where you want to make a difference and why.** It is standing above the fray and allowing yourself to smile.

Creating ‘shafts of stillness’ can be an effective way of pacing your energies and keeping events in perspective. What may seem initially an indulgent luxury can prove to be re-energising and re-vitalising.

Creating ‘shafts of stillness’: some ideas

- create some personal space where you are uncluttered,
- cultivate stillness as an attitude of mind,
- allow yourself to breathe, relax and cherish good moments,
- develop the “mental stillness” muscle and the ability to block out or tolerate external noise,
- be responsible for creating contexts of calmness and stillness for those you work with,
- know how to use stillness to calm you down and move you into the right pace,
- build methods of dealing with habitual noise in open plan, e-mails, texts and chatter,
- accept when noise and interference can be a helpful stimulus,
- know how you can use shafts of stillness as a catalyst for action, and
- allow silence in conversation and do not always rush to fill the space

SEIZE THE FUTURE



Taking control of the future as a leader is both hugely exciting and daunting. It involves recognising the uncertainties and harsh realities without being diminished by them. Taking control of the future includes being upbeat and assertive, seeing and taking opportunities. It is recognising that you may well be developing and using different skills and attributes.

Progress will involve accepting the new reality, allowing freshness of thinking, ensuring good quality engagement, embracing radical approaches, both organisationally and personally, and pacing your energies. In this journey, knowing your sources of personal support will be invaluable – be they family, friends, colleagues and a mentor or a coach.

Are you ready to be positive in your approach and attitude? The choice of attitude is yours. Keep the focus on what is most important to you and be willing to take control of the opportunities that will emerge.

Seizing the Future: in summary

- Define clearly what difference you want to make,
- Develop and share goals and objectives,
- Take control of your diary and create time for thinking and reflection,
- Take control of your working schedule and pace your energy,
- Choose your own attitude to the new reality and the future,
- Know who is committed to your success, and
- Recognise and celebrate progress.

PRAESTA

Praesta is an international firm of executive business coaches. Our services include one-to-one executive coaching, senior team facilitation, leadership development workshops and board effectiveness consultation.

More information is available on our website:

www.praesta.com.

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FURTHER READING

The Four Vs of Leadership: Vision, Values, Value Added and Vitality,
Peter Shaw, Capstone 2006

Thriving in a Faster Faster World, Heather Dawson, Praesta 2007

Riding the Rapids, Peter Shaw and Jane Stephens, Praesta 2008

The Power of Coaching Top Teams, Jacqueline Scholes-Rhodes and
Hilary Lines, Praesta 2009

Raise your Game: how to succeed at work, Peter Shaw,
Capstone 2009

Exceeding Expectation: The principles of outstanding leadership,
The Work Foundation, 2010

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