

# 10 Lessons Learned from 2009

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Wow, what a year!

2009 has come and gone, and many of us are taking a huge sigh of relief. Going through one of the worst recessions in U.S. history will certainly take the wind out of your sails. But we appear to have weathered the worst of the storm. And while the economy might not rebound with the speed and vigor we would like, it at least appears to be heading in the right direction again.

So what did we learn from the trials and tribulations of the past year? And how can we apply those lessons going forward? Here are 10 things I believe that leaders need to do differently to position their businesses for success in 2010.

1. **Get used to the likelihood there will be no normal anymore.** The old business world that most of us knew and loved went away with the recession, and it's not coming back. To adapt to today's business realities, question all your beliefs and assumptions, get comfortable with uncertainty, and adjust your expectations. For most, the new 'normal' will be slow and sustained growth rather than a hockey-stick curve and it will continue to surprise us.
2. **Break the rules.** If you're not breaking rules on a regular basis, your customers and markets have probably already left you behind. The new rule for today's chaotic markets is to constantly challenge the status quo. Don't automatically assume that what made you successful in the past will continue to make you successful in the future.
3. **Recognize and minimize your "MSUs."** We all constantly MSU (make stuff up) about our company, industry, and markets. During the strategic planning process, put everyone's beliefs and assumptions out on the table and ask, "What do we think we know to be absolutely true about our customers, competitors and markets? Is it still true? If not, what has changed and how do we need to respond to that change?" Get data and question your long standing beliefs constantly.
4. **Embrace social media.** Embracing social media can be a real competitive advantage. In addition to instantly connecting you with customers, social media enables you to "mindshare" with industry peers, demonstrate thought leadership, recruit talent and more. Study the social media habits of your customers, and use the appropriate tools to make them part of your community.
5. **Expect more transparency.** With the advent of social media, you can no longer control public perception by limiting information about your company and products. When you withhold information, today's bloggers, twitterers and forum posters will make it up for

you. The next generation of market leaders will excel at using social media to create transparency and build trust with their key stakeholders.

6. **Communicate to fill the void.** Today's employees are beset with doubts, uncertainties and fears about their jobs. If you don't tell them what is going on, they will fill the void with rumors and misinformation, usually negative. Constantly let employees know where the organization is going and what your plan for winning is. In today's world, you can't over-communicate.
7. **Encourage strategic thinking.** Strategic planning involves a formal process whereby senior management peers into the future and charts a course of action for the organization. Strategic thinking occurs when the entire organization begins to act in concert with the strategic plan. Teach your people to anticipate opportunities and threats while managing the day-to-day tasks that fall within their scope of responsibilities.
8. **Make innovation a way of life.** Innovation needs to become an integral part of the way you do business, not just a one-time event. Constantly challenge the way you do things, even when they have always worked well. Strive to create new products, services and ideas that have real value for stakeholders. Look for different and novel ways to deal with ongoing challenges. Constantly seek to implement new and better ways of achieving results.
9. **Slow down to go fast.** In times of uncertainty, prepare to pause, focus, and plan. Learn to anticipate the unanticipated by making scenario planning part of your daily routine rather than an afterthought when plans don't pan out. Take the time to consider multiple perspectives and engage others who have diverse views. This may feel like slowing down, but will actually help you get where you want to go much faster.
10. **Get back to basics.** When everything around you diverts you into complexity, get back to basics. Make strategic planning a way of life in your organization. Use a strategic planning framework to drive what you do and where you focus your energies. Constantly check for internal and external forces that may impact where you're going, what you need to do and how you need to do it. Organize your day around achieving your destination, and focus on informing, inspiring and engaging others in getting there.

Those are my top 10 tips for success in 2010. I'd love to hear what you plan to do differently going forward.

Here's wishing you clarity, focus, and great success in the New Year!