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Playing the Numbers

If you type the number 2022 into a search engine, you may discover that those who follow meaning in numbers see good things ahead—success among them. Given that we’re toward the end of the pandemic, that’s not a bad outlook to have as another new year approaches.

I think most of us are looking forward to the coming year. How could we not? We’re at the tail end, hopefully, of a horrific pandemic and a string of one lockdown after another. The latest predictions I’ve seen have economic growth a tad slower from 2021,



which might actually be helpful from a supply-chain and staffing standpoint, given the headaches firms have been feeling trying to keep goods flowing and find enough hires to keep up with pent-up consumer demand. Most firms, I figure, will also work out their in-office/remote/hybrid work dance as the year progresses, increasing both productivity and morale.

All of which should make piloting organizations somewhat easier. But will it? We know that leading in hard times is a tough test—particularly in a pandemic. Ask any leadership expert and they will tell you that company chiefs face challenges too as the tides turn. And strong leadership at this point is every bit as important.

At the height of the pandemic, for example, many

CEOs stopped providing financial forecasts during quarterly reports. With the walls caving in, they had little choice. Now, though, the pressure to announce and produce results will pick up, especially as Wall Street and other stakeholders weigh in more heavily. Meanwhile, building up staffs might seem a lot easier than reducing them, but we’ve discovered that rapid hiring at least comes with its own set of challenges.

In general, there is a forgiveness for leadership decision making in tough times that is often missing in a robust era. That’s partly because it’s a different kind of pressure. I asked no less an authority on leadership than Kevin Cashman, our firm’s global coleader of CEO and enterprise leader development. “During crisis we must react to the *now*; during success we

must reflect to create the *next*,” he says. Clearly, there is a difference.

In Kevin’s view, it’s not about tough years or good years. It’s about maintaining equanimity amid all the ups and downs. “Being thrown off by either reduces our effectiveness and energy,” he says. “To identify ourselves with the situation we are in limits us and others. We are unlikely as good as our successes or as bad as our failures.”

Maybe that’s the most important lesson to take as we close the books on one year and enter another. Corporate leaders all over are discovering that chasing numbers only—quarterly results, capital returns—creates a treadmill approach to business that sounds a lot like the past, not 2022. ▀