



# The Myth of the Low-Hanging Fruit

When times get hard, it is easy for leaders to focus on business survival, which in most cases begins with a frantic attempt to cut costs. In the past few months, companies as diverse as Starbucks, NBC Television, Telecom Italia and probably your local department store are all examples of companies that appeared to be doing well when suddenly they were under unbelievable pressure. It is likely that if you have not had this experience yet, you will soon.



The tendency then is to do something and do it fast. We start putting together task forces and eliminating extra travel. We stop all of the offsite meetings and eliminate the Christmas party. I recall while I was a university professor at North Carolina State University in the 90s, there was an announcement that we were thirteen million dollars over budget so graduate students could no longer use the copy machine!! All of these actions are generally part of the game of “Picking the Low-Hanging Fruit.”

While it makes sense to go after some of the obvious actions, if for no other reason than to clearly deliver the message of urgency, there is a problem with the focus on Low-Hanging Fruit. Whether your purpose is to cut costs, create greater employee or customer satisfaction, or to improve your marketing results, the Low-Hanging Fruit are more likely to be distractions than to be meaningful. They are the clutter of things that should have been done a long time ago and are overdue. They may have to be done, but they can also represent leadership procrastination from making the tough decisions.

To ensure that you don't get caught in the trap of the Low-Hanging Fruit, consider the following:

1. While you are working with your teams to determine the right course of action for your current condition, set up one task force that has the task of “Dealing with the Obvious.” Empower them to identify the stuff that has been waiting for a crisis before somebody actually dealt with it, and then deal with it.
2. From the very beginning, include a mix of employees from various locations, positions and levels in the planning and implementation teams. First, it is likely that the line employees are most aware of what is really of value versus what is just hard to let go of. Second, by including employees in the execution planning you will have created internal advocates for the actions that follow.
3. Spend more time and resources on the mid-and long-term than you feel you should. In an orchard, the fruit at the top of the tree is more exposed to the sun and often ripens before the lower fruit. If you wait too long to get started on the bigger ideas you may well miss your opportunity.



4. Let all employees know what you are doing. Be transparent about the fact that you will deal with the most obvious immediate actions but that your interest is in long-term survival and success. Tell them from Day One that there will be some hard choices and that these will be communicated openly and honestly when they are made.

What looks like an easy hit today (eliminating training, postponing customer events, etc) may become a major problem tomorrow when it will be more important than ever to have energized employees and delighted customers. Often the hard decisions are as obvious as the easy ones...they are just harder. If being a great leader was just about implementing the easy actions, then we would have great leaders everywhere we turned. What do you think?



Dr. Todd Thomas is an author, speaker, leadership coach and an associate professor at the DeVos Graduate School of Management at Northwood University in Midland, Michigan. You can follow his blog at [www.LeadershipMattersNow.com](http://www.LeadershipMattersNow.com)