I just finished reading “Onward,” a fascinating book by Howard Schultz, president of Starbucks, the coffee giant—it takes you step by step from Schultz’ decision to return as CEO, in order to bring the company back from the brink, onward to the company’s remarkable recovery.

What made this read so interesting for me was that at about same time our company was going through a similar situation—except for the fact that Starbucks boasts many more zeros in its sales figures and projections.

However, as Schultz explains it, he looks at each of his 16,000 locations as being unique and necessarily able to stand on their own. As you probably know, no matter how large or small a company may be, many—if not most—of the challenges are the same.

ALL companies need to deliver a profitable product—whether goods or services—to an end user. Of course, the process of doing that is what separates the bad from the good, and the good from the great!

I suspect you would have to be living under a rock not to have noticed or been affected by the transformation our industry has undergone over the past 10 years—due to the Internet, outsourcing to other countries, over-capacity, the downturn in our economy, digital tablets for reading books, and the list goes on.

Many companies are still in survival mode, and too many have thrown in the towel. The challenges are great, but as I wrote in a song many years ago: “It’s time to turn our face toward the wind,” and face those challenges head on.

So, I was inspired by the way Howard Schultz faced and acknowledged his company’s challenges. He shared his failures and successes as he looked for that silver bullet to ride back to the top. He soon came to realize, however, there was no ONE silver bullet that was going to turn Starbucks around; rather, it was going to take an arsenal of new ideas (bullets). Schultz called it a “Transformation Agenda.”

Around that same time, we lost 60 percent of our printing business almost overnight in 2009. It came as such a shock, I didn’t know if we would survive. However, I took comfort in the fact that since 1994, as I chronicled in my book “System Busters,” we had been systematically writing down and improving our processes of delivering profitable products to our customers.

I felt certain we had been doing many things RIGHT, many things GOOD, and even some things GREAT. We had systemized every part of our company, which turned out to be just what we needed when it became absolutely necessary to downsize our company in order to save it. But, it didn’t change the fact that it was a new day—a day of new challenges and a not so bright day, right in the middle of what many call “The Great Recession.”

Like Schultz, I made the decision to take back many of the responsibilities of running our printing company, while still keeping our software company operating and improving. You see, through systemization I had been able to delegate most all of the day-to-day responsibilities of my printing company to others, which gave me the time to build another company. It was this same systemization that gave me the time necessary to spend on the rebuilding of our sales and marketing and to oversee our downsizing.
It was a very humbling experience to realize, as far as growth was concerned, that we would be starting from close to the bottom. I will admit it was hard to re-energize and motivate myself for the battle; there were many days of disappointments and trials. Yet I saw the hand of providence move many times, when all seemed hopeless; a reprieve would come, and we lived to fight another day.

With our Daily Routine checklists, Quality Control checklists and many of our written systems, we were able to downsize and delegate the responsibilities of employees we laid off to our remaining staff, while barely missing a beat. Our waste remained low and we still kept our on-time delivery rate at nearly 100 percent.

We also came up with our own “transformation agenda” that called for lowering costs by drastically cutting spending in every area, without destroying our reputation and hurting staff members with families who relied on us. Our agenda also called for continuing our move forward and UPWARD in marketing, and finding new ways to bring in new business and rethink our product mix.

We spent many hours not only planning new marketing campaigns, but systemizing them to ensure they were carried out consistently, in the same manner as our Quality Control systems. We also built our unique version of an Automatic Marketing system. We have learned over the past 15 years that without written systems, a company is bound to get loosy-goosy, shoot-from-the-hip results.

I also sought out relationships with other printers in our area, in order to band together for these challenging times. Slowly, but surely, we began to find OUR way back from the brink—back to black.

So, after a two-year struggle, I’m proud to report at this writing, our excitement about the future of print, and optimism over the direction in which our printing company is headed. We will also be announcing very soon that System100, our software for another company, will be taking a quantum leap forward, as we finish beta testing on an exciting new module.

And all this happened during the worst economic times of my business career!

This past week my two sons, who will be taking over the reins of our printing company, returned from a scheduled meeting with many industry leaders from our area and gave me their full assessment of what they heard and learned. My oldest son said, “Dad, as I sat there and took notes on what the speaker was advising everyone in attendance to do in order to survive and thrive, I realized we were doing, or were already planning, everything he mentioned.” That was a conformation for me that we are on the right track and that my two sons GET IT!

Did I mention? Great systems work!

Note of caution: I suggest we, as business owners and managers, need to be more aware of the direction of our country and the leadership that can affect the future of our businesses. Candidates for various offices should be closely vetted by us all, and not just left up to the media. Our founders gave us a great gift, a country where we have the right, at least for now, to pursue happiness, and also to pursue watching our businesses grow and thrive. But, if we take our eyes off the ball, we could all find ourselves fighting over how we lost it and who’s to blame. Yes, great systems work! But, they must be maintained and carefully guarded or they will return to chaos—and so will our country.

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