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Yes, we can control our behavior, attitudes

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We can't control the sliding economy and the resulting fallout, but we can:

- Control our attitude toward it. We can take the long view while acknowledging the current pain, whether it's our own or our neighbor's. We can remain optimistic in our knowledge of the history and spirit of our great country.
- Control our conversations about it. Everywhere we turn, whether to newspapers, radio, the Internet, the post office or clients' offices, the dire straits in which we collectively (and globally) find ourselves is Topic One. What a shame. Scaring ourselves to death isn't going to make the economic cycle move more quickly. Find something more inspiring to talk about: the marathon you just ran, the interesting project you're working on or the great client you just landed.
- Control our lesser appetites for too much alcohol, too much food, too much gossip and too much bad news. None of these things makes anything better in the long run.
- Control our emotional wake. How do people feel after being around you? Are they lifted up and encouraged? Or are they disheartened and afraid? Never underestimate the power of a simple smile or a kind word.
- Control our civility. It's all too easy these days to allow financial strain to nip away at good manners. Flipping off the guy in the car next to you, having a shouting match on your cell phone in public, or unloading on an employee who somehow hasn't met your expectations doesn't make the economy better. It simply diminishes you.
- Control our focus. When resources are scarce, pay attention to the activities that will reap the most reward for the smallest investment. We should skip the overly broad, ego-stroking advertising and put some serious effort into creating and

sustaining relationships with clients and referral sources. In good times and hard times, these two groups will sustain us.

- Control our internal communications. Every day, professionals are bombarded with bad news from bloggers, analysts and cable show screamers. We probably don't need more information inflation from inside our organization. Firms are now watching costs closely, which is wise in all economic cycles. However, unless we are truly in danger of laying off professionals, we must be very cautious about the words and tone we use when discussing finances. We have to be honest, of course, but we need to temper that honesty with optimism and unity. If we convey the idea that we're all in this together, then we have a chance of getting through. If we frighten people by sharing our own anxieties with them, we risk losing great employees and partners.

- Control our external communications. Even if our firms are doing well, it's possible that some of our clients are struggling. And if our firms aren't doing well, it makes no sense to try to spin reality. So, when we ask a client or prospect, "How's business?" and the answer is gloomy, the only response must be kindness: a hand on the shoulder, a direct look in the eye and something like, "I'm sorry to hear that, and I really hope things get better for you soon." If it's appropriate, you might add: "Let me know how I can help." And when we are asked about our businesses, the best response these days might be "We're OK. We're moving forward with our plans and staying open to opportunity." To paraphrase writer/poet Maya Angelou: You need to tell the truth, but you don't have to tell everything.

- Control our self-talk. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we tell ourselves that we have the strength to endure, the resources to cope and the spirit to help each other. None of this is easy, but if we all get our minds right, we can work our way out of this mess with our relationships and businesses intact.

- Control our gratitude. Even in the face of difficulty, remember how lucky we are to have strong families, good friends, able bodies and nimble minds. We must never take any of these for granted. Whatever else might come, and with a little luck, they'll all still be here when economic distress is merely a memory.

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