

Leadership in Times of Crisis

Good leadership is essential all the time, and more visible in hard times. A crisis often reveals good leadership, and a crisis doesn't make good leaders.

When faced with a crisis, does the leader panic from uncertainty, or do they see and act on the bigger picture?

Lives are at risk, and leaders have a responsibility to be there for each of their stakeholders and their community. Your employees, customers and partners know this.

Here are some ideas and resources to help guide you through to the other side.

Lead with Care and Concern

Great leaders care about their employees, customers and stakeholders as people first. This distinction may not be noticed during a typical workday, and becomes vital in a crisis.

During a crisis, leaders can show they care for employees by staying connected and sharing the "why" behind decisions. Regular communication and transparency in your messaging will be important.

Stay connected with your team and stakeholders via regular meeting rhythms. Reinforce your organization's purpose and core values to guide healthy thoughts, words and actions.

Instead of saying nothing, consider calling everyone together and sharing,

"Things aren't going well. We're not sure what to do yet.
Here is what we're working on. As soon as we figure something out, we'll tell you.
And, our next update is two days from now."

Specifically, stay curious and look for those who:

- Need help, support or are struggling, perhaps to complete tasks they would normally handle with ease, and/or perhaps related to personal issues or stress
- Need purpose related tasks to stay active, focused and healthy
 - What are the needs of our customers? Employees? Our personal and professional network?
 - How/where can we offer support or solutions to these challenges?

"Take care of the people, the products, and the profits – in that order."
Ben Horowitz, "The Hard Thing About Hard Things"

Practice Empathy

In crisis, bad things happen to good people. Some will do everything medical experts recommend – wash their hands, practice social distancing, etc. – and will still get sick.

Great leaders have empathy.

Most of your stakeholders are asking, “How will this impact me? My family?” They are concerned, some even afraid. They will not follow you if they do not believe that you understand.

You will want to acknowledge their fears and speak to them. Help them know you understand what they are feeling. Don’t be afraid to say what people are thinking. Do everything you can to value your people.

Life experience confirms that overcoming challenges and choosing “the road less travelled” translates into strength, resiliency and opportunity. Leading with empathy, encourage and support your people as best you can.

Perhaps your organizational Purpose, Vision, Mission and Core Values are resources you can pull from for focus and strength in difficult times.

As additional support, consider leaders you admire and write down the characteristics you admire in them. Use that list to guide your behavior and actions every day. Once complete, consider involving your team in the same exercise and a related discussion.

Sample traits could include:

- A willingness to serve others - to lead by example
- Curiosity, compassion and empathy
- Quiet and gentle strength
- Emotions under control

In staying connected, please consider the following ideas:

- Video conferencing best practices - <https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/covid19.html>
- Give yourself permission to meet and connect outside of formal meeting sessions
 - Consider social “meet-ups” or creating an on-line work space, even if each of you are working on different activities

Address the Brutal Facts of Your Situation

You must have an honest assessment of the situation. Identify the specific problems and challenges you'll need to solve. While compiling the facts, consider that many people have trouble being honest or realistic - some may not acknowledge the crisis we're facing.

Tell the truth, even when the truth is negative, uncertain or scary.

As leaders, we don't motivate through a crisis - we lead through a crisis. This is a time for wise decisions. Be realistic and truthful.

Creating a climate of truth and realism involves four basic practices:

1. Lead with questions, not answers
2. Engage in dialogue and debate - not coercion
3. Review progress and evaluate without blame
4. Build red flag mechanisms that turn information into insight that CANNOT be ignored

Great leaders and organizations respond to adversity differently. They hit the realities of their situation head-on. As a result, they emerged from adversity even stronger.

Leadership does not begin just with vision. You must also get people to confront the brutal facts of the situation and to act on the implications.

As both affirmation and as a resource, consider the Stockdale paradox, summarized as:

*"You must never confuse your faith that you'll prevail in the end,
Faith you can never afford to lose,
With the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current situation,
Whatever those facts may be,
Knowing the experience will become a defining event in your life."*

<https://bigthink.com/personal-growth/stockdale-paradox-confronting-reality-vital-success>

Finally, using your honest assessment, you must be willing to make the hard decisions.

If your decisions will come with pain or loss, give yourself permission to hurt. Don't run from the pain - step into it. Failure is an event - never a person. You can rise again!

Setting Priorities

In addressing your challenges, it should be clear that only a few things matter.

In defining your top priorities and creating clarity and focus, please consider:

1. What is mission critical?
2. What is strategic and important?
3. What is important, or perhaps helpful, but not essential?
4. What external requests are coming at you that are someone else's top priority?

Clearly define your tiers and focus your energy on tier 1 & 2 right now. Avoid the distractions that will come.

Everyone will have ideas – some good ideas. For best results, view these ideas from the lens of your top priorities.

Once your priorities are established and you and your team begin translating them into a plan, please consider:

- Expect some false starts. There is no road map. You and your team will make some mistakes. Things are changing rapidly and reinforce that you'll all need to adapt and adjust as new information becomes available.

Focus on "progress not perfection."

- Think long-term but limit your plan to short term activities. Avoid speculating on how long this will last, and perhaps better to be pleasantly surprised than constantly disappointed. Be wise to consider worst-case scenario, but don't create fear.

"If everything is important, then nothing is."

- Patrick Lencioni

- You might be scared and you don't have to know it all, but you do have to show up and make the wisest decisions you can. You won't get it all right. Focus on creating value.

Where is the Opportunity?!

The Chinese symbol for “crisis” has two components: one means “danger” and the other means “opportunity.” In times of crisis, we must take action to minimize the danger and risk to our people and our organizations, while remaining curious and open to the opportunities around us.

Ask yourself, and your team,

What is the opportunity? Today? In the near future?

Where will the opportunity be as we move through this and into recovery?

Consider both personally and professionally. Examples could include:

- Maximizing on buying opportunities in the stock market
- Using this window to strengthen your personal and professional relationships
- Engaging in professional development opportunities in down times

How can you support your team and organization, and come out stronger?!

Community engagement

Every organization is part of a larger community. Employees use roads to get to work and their children go to public schools. If they get sick, they go to a hospital for care.

Consider how you can best serve your stakeholders and your community with the tools and resources you have.

- Eg. Volunteer support, pro-active messaging, etc.